

Seeing Sound in the Pompeian *Domus*: Soundscape Analysis at the House of the Vestals

The “sensory turn” in archaeology has opened the discipline to productive new means of assessing bodily experience among ancient populations (cf. Day 2013). In the wake such seminal works as Christopher Tilley’s *A Phenomenology of Landscape* (1994) and David Howes’s *Empire of the Senses* (2005), scholars whose focus lies on the past now increasingly acknowledge that the world was populated by corporeal beings with sensual experiences shaped by their particular socio-cultural environments—and that their experiences shaped those environments, in turn.

Despite a recent blossoming of interest in the myriad sensoria that existed within the Graeco-Roman world (cf. Betts 2017), such analysis for the Roman domestic sphere is sorely lacking. This remains a surprising lacuna due to the general recognition of the multisensoriality of the Roman garden and the longstanding appreciation of the Roman house as a key locus for social performance and a stand-in for homeowners’ identities via their manipulation of physical space and evocative décor (cf. Wallace-Hadrill 1994; von Stackelberg 2009). Following Eleanor Betts’ (2017) recommendations for conducting a sensory archaeology on Roman material and expanding upon the foundations established by previous studies of domestic *atria* and peristyle gardens, I aim in this paper to reintegrate sound firmly into existing understandings of lived experience within the Roman house. Aurality, like vision, I argue, was an indispensable component in structuring the physical and socio-cultural permutations of Pompeian dwellings.

To access the Pompeian domestic soundscape, I investigate the sound-producers and sound-mitigators within a particular dwelling, the House of the Vestals (VI.1.6-8, 24-26), before exploring the culture-specific connotations of domestic and urban noises via contemporary early

Imperial writings on the topic. This paper constitutes the first time, to my knowledge, that an aural analysis has been performed to help explicate the architectural form of a Roman house. The strategic placement of splashing ornamental fountains with the *domus* and the location of intimate reception rooms in more secluded domestic spaces testify to a strong interest in controlling sound. These architectural tactics accrued potency via their juxtaposition with furnishings, décor, garden plantings, and social activities that occupied particular household zones. I conclude that the resulting soundscape was crafted to envelop the homeowners and their guests in a provocative, status-affirming environment conducive to the enjoyment of synesthetic pleasure.

The House of the Vestals lends itself particularly well to soundscape analysis. The decade-long excavation of Insula VI.1 undertaken by the Anglo-American Project in Pompeii (AAPP) has placed the house within its wider urban context and subjected its subterranean pipe-works to detailed investigation. This research has thereby produced the quantifiable data necessary to reconstruct various spatial relationships to sound-producers within and without the dwelling; it has also provided comprehensive information about ceiling height, wall thickness, and the presence or absence of windows or spaces open to the sky, further elements advantageous for understanding the acoustics of structures that now lie in ruins. Moreover, Rick Jones and Damian Robinson (2005) have synthesized other elements of the House of the Vestals, including room articulation, floor pavements, wall frescoes, and small finds, to partition the house into distinct usage-zones: thus, we can deduce the types of sounds that were present (or absent) in spaces generally associated with specific social practices.

Betts reminds us that archaeological remains alone cannot furnish us with all the tools necessary to decipher the culture-specific meaning of embodied sensory engagement. I

accordingly incorporate into my study a number of early Imperial literary sources that elucidate, in some capacity, how Romans interpreted the kaleidoscope of auditory stimuli that pervaded their world (i.e. Horace, *Epodi*; Seneca, *De Providentia*; Columella, *De Re Rusticae*; Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae*, etc.). Despite generic divergences, a general consensus emerges, wherein the ancient authors tend to deem sounds associated with the peaceful natural world “pleasant,” while noises like the commotion of the street and cooking activities triggered irritation. These primary descriptions are useful in that they reflect an élite *koine* among the Imperial court of Julio-Claudian and Flavian Rome, whose social customs arguably had strong bearing on Pompeian urban-dwellers.

Bibliography

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