
The concept at the heart of Simon Ellis’ work is the well-established, but sometimes overlooked, fact that there is simply no such thing as ‘the Roman house’. In fact, the Roman world produced a startling array of dwellings, each influenced in form and function by a range of factors. As a consequence it is necessary to speak not of ‘the house’ but of ‘housing’. Ellis emphasises this diversity in a book that aims to provide ‘the first empire-wide overall introduction to Roman housing’ (1).

The work seeks to fulfill this aim by taking a survey approach to the subject, interweaving a series of case studies from different areas of the empire. In ch.1, Ellis acknowledges, at some length, the difficulties created by the shortage of evidence and its geographically erratic nature. This has resulted in a situation in which housing in large sections of the empire cannot be discussed at all, due to a lack of information. Nonetheless the main body of the text attempts to cover as much ground as possible. Chapter 2 explores the form and function of houses for the élite, be they aristocratic or merely moneyed. Chapter 3 turns to the more mundane options available to the rest of society, examining differences in the nature and purpose of town and country dwellings. Chapter 4 explores the various forms of decoration that have survived in archaeological deposits and ch.5 discusses the role of furniture in the Roman house. Finally, ch.6 offers some insight into the latest theoretical approaches to the archaeological study of dwelling occupation in the Roman world. On reflection, the title of this work might equally well have been Roman Homes. From first to last, the real focus of attention is not the finer points of architectural planning or construction methods, but the house as an occupied space. Ellis explores the logistical and social significance of ground plans and room arrangements, and the use of decoration and furniture as both ancient social and modern archaeological indicators.

The work falls roughly into two parts: chs.1-3, which deal with housing forms across the empire, and chs.4-6, which discuss room use, decoration and furnishings in a more limited geographic context. The comparatively compressed format of the former group is problematic. In
ch. 2 Ellis moves at speed from the origins, form and distribution of atrium and peristyle houses, through Spanish, Gallic, African and Aegean prestige housing of the imperial period and palatial architecture of the high and late empires, to finish with the élite housing of northern Syria and Britain in the late antique period. Chapter 3 sets a similar breakneck pace. It begins with urban house forms found in Italy, Asia Minor, Africa, Gaul, Germany and Britain, before turning to farms and village dwellings in Syria, Egypt, Africa, Britain, Gaul and Spain. Ellis’ concern with the social significance of housing design means that simple description is accompanied by discussion of complex academic questions within this compressed format. For example, ch. 2 tackles the role of Romanisation in the development of housing for the provincial élite and ch. 3 considers the difficulties of identifying the practice of commercial activities in a domestic context.

The result is somewhat bewildering; no sooner has one subject engaged the reader’s attention than the author turns to a new one. This pace is acceptable for simple description in a basic introductory work, but it is unsuited to the exploration of involved academic concepts, like Romanisation, which are still under active review and debate. Chapters 2 and 3 simply offer too much variety in insufficient depth to make this ‘overall introductory guide’ approach workable. On a more positive note, the use of sub-headings within these chapters signals subject changes clearly and the carefully assembled site index allows the reader to track down all material relating to a particular area with ease. Equally, there can be no complaint concerning the provision of illustrations. There are twenty-two black-and-white plates and an outline ground plan is supplied for most buildings discussed.

In the second group, chs. 4-5 do follow the same style of approach as the first group, combining the description of decoration and furnishings in use in various housing forms with an exploration of their significance, both for their contemporaries and for modern scholars. However, this format is used here to far greater effect because there is less material available for discussion. Ellis concentrates mainly on a handful of well-documented examples from Italy, Britain, Gaul, Asia Minor and North Africa. The result is much more successful. He goes beyond the basic art historical descriptions familiar from the works of authors such as Roger Ling (e.g. *Roman Art*, Harmondsworth 1988; *Roman Painting*, Cambridge 1991) or
Martin Henig (e.g. *A Handbook of Roman Art*, London 1983; *The Art of Roman Britain*, London 1995), to offer a genuine beginners’ guide to both the practical and social function of decoration and furniture in Roman homes. Ellis’ observations on the way that finds of furniture and decorative material can inform the scholarly interpretation of the dwellings in which they are found are of particular interest. Modern scholars are often reliant on such finds when trying to assess the status and layout of houses, especially those that lie outside the atrium/peristyle tradition. Thus, bland geometric patterns in an otherwise elaborate mosaic floor may indicate a dining room with permanent couches, whereas the remains of a couch found in a room with minimal decoration may suggest a cubiculum rather than a reception room. Ellis also outlines the potential pitfalls presented by the use of such material for interpretative purposes. Chapter 6 then takes the theoretical aspects of the study of Roman housing a stage further, exploring current trends in thinking about the orientation and circulation patterns of domestic space and the way in which basic dwelling forms were developed to respond to the varied needs of their owners and occupiers. In the past these subjects have never escaped the realms of specialist literature.

Nonetheless, this book is hardly suitable for the complete novice in Roman studies. Its dual function as both a guide to housing types and a social study of Roman homes presents real challenges to the beginner. Ellis’ discussions of the arrangement, decoration and furnishings of rooms are only fully comprehensible if one is familiar with the daily functions and rituals that are believed to have been conducted in them. The short glossary of Latin and Greek terms does provide some assistance, but Ellis still assumes a fairly comprehensive knowledge of Roman culture and society on the part of his audience. Equally, expositions of differing housing forms found across the empire are far more intelligible if the reader understands something of the cultural, geographical and historical place within the empire held by each area involved. Furthermore, endnotes are kept fairly brief and there is no separate bibliography, or any kind of ‘further reading’ guide. This is disappointing in a self-proclaimed introductory work.

Ellis offers some fascinating insights, particularly on the subject of the interpretation of material finds in accordance with established theoretical
models, but as a basic introduction to the subject of Roman housing the work is not an unqualified success. Two factors seem to make it difficult to produce a satisfactory beginners' work in this field. Firstly, although Ellis is right to point out that information concerning Roman housing is somewhat limited, nonetheless houses from the four corners of the Roman empire are open to study, resulting in considerable variety within the body of available material. Secondly, the uncertainties of interpretation that plague this field of research make it absolutely necessary to provide information on the theoretical framework upon which modern scholarship bases its conclusions, as Ellis does. Both factors make it difficult to discuss Roman housing on an empire-wide basis in the straightforward manner and concise format expected of basic introductions. Ellis tries and fails, in part at least.

The end result is a work that runs the risk of confusing its intended audience instead of enlightening it. The book will prove far more useful to experienced students looking for an introduction to the theoretical basis for the interpretation of domestic space, than it will for the novice student of Roman archaeology.

Lisa Bligh
Worcester College, Oxford