Houses, Tombs and Temples
The Atrium as Italo-Etruscan Architectural Concept and as Societal Form

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With the atrium house and its architecture, I have chosen a topic that may be considered Etruscan-Italic to the highest degree. Greek culture has put its stamp on almost all areas of Etruscan art and architecture – but not on the atrium house. There must be special reasons for such an exception. In my short contribution I should like to consider those reasons. These are, to summarize: firstly that the atrium house is based upon a room conception that has its deepest roots in the religious sphere, and secondly that the layout of the atrium house reflects the structure of central Italy’s patrician and gentilici society. Neither condition existed in contemporary Greek culture.

Let me start with a brief look at the history of research and at early forms of the atrium house. I say ‘early forms’, as I do not intend here to enter into the still controversial debate about the etymological aspect of the word ‘atrium’ (Bonfante and Bonfante 2002, 39 n.59; Van der Meer 2007, 158) or about the genesis of this architectural form (Blanck 1976; Carafa 1998; Bonfante 2002, 39 n.59; Van der Meer 2007, 158). Apart from this, I have provided important information about the early forms of the atrium house. Here it has been demonstrated that the formal structure of the atrium house with its central courtyard, its back room opening on to the courtyard and its axisymmetric ground plan, was already formalized in the early 5th century BC; however, these houses obviously cannot be considered as truly Roman but belong rather to the Samnian epoch of Pompeii.

The excavations at the Etruscan settlement of Marzabotto have provided important information about the early forms of the atrium house. Here it has been demonstrated that the atrium house was not yet organically assembled (Wistrand 1970, 202–3). Because of the enormous number of people present, which required a correspondingly large reception space in front of the residential wing proper, as in fact appears in the later dwelling-houses, another important thought comes to mind. Scholars have presumed that, during those receptions, the patron was seated in a prominent place, centred at the end of the fore-court at the passage to the tablinum. The chair usually mentioned is not the sella curulis but a throne, the so-called solium with a curved back-rest (Wistrand 1970, 208–9). This is actually a decidedly Etruscan piece of furniture, which, from the 7th century, frequently appears in Etruscan chamber-tombs, made of stone, bronze, wood or clay (Steingräber 1979, 24–5, 148–51). Without any doubt, in the tomb it imitates its rôle in the dwelling-house, where it served as seating for the paterfamilias and his wife to hold court (Prayon 1975, 172–3). An example from the funerary sphere is apparent in the Tomb of Shields and Seats: two armchairs with foot-rests of the solium type were placed in the anteroom of the tomb in such a way as to flank on either side the central burial-chamber containing the biers of the patron and his wife (Fig. 1a) (Prayon 1975, 108–12. pls 42–3, 85 no. 43).

The central positioning of the solium in early Roman patrician houses has, to my mind, not only a practical but also an ideological motivation, as well as having a religious component. To support this assertion, two related Archaic forms of architecture need to be included in our study. These are, on the one hand, the so-called regia (Filippi 2004; Prayon, 2004, 96–103; Scheffer 1990; Torelli 1985, 26–32; 1993), and on the other hand the temple (Fig. 1b) – although the differentiation of the forms and their meanings remains to be clarified at the present state of research. While the temple was the earthly abode of the deity, the regia functioned as the seat, official building, and also the palace of the ruler, who, in Archaic times, did not only wield worldly power but fulfilled sacred functions as well.

This makes the strict separation of temple and regia difficult. Virgil clearly describes the regia of King Latinus as a
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The same difficulty emerges from the findings at Poggio Civitate/Murlo (Haynes 2000, 114–26, figs 94–106; Siena 1985, 64–154), Acquarossa (Haynes 2000, 138–42, figs 117–23; Siena 1985 41–58; Strandberg Olofsson 1989; Wikander and Wikander 1990) and Rome (Brown 1935; 1974/75; Coarelli 1983, 56–79), since as well as their secular function, they obviously had a sacred function: they were official buildings and, at the same time, sanctuaries. The core area of these so-called regiae consisted of three rooms with the central room opening along its complete width on to a courtyard or portico in front. Meanwhile, a building in Tarquinia, the so-called edificio Beta, may be considered a predecessor of these buildings dating to the 6th century. Originally, edificio Beta had only one room but before the middle of the 7th century had been expanded to become a building with three cellae; Maria Bonghi Jovino, the excavator, interprets the central room, which is closed to the outside, as a sacellum (Bonghi Jovino 1999).

Three bronze objects belong to that second building phase of edificio Beta: a lituus, an axe and a round shield, which had all been laid down in a pit just in front of the central room. They have been interpreted as a kind of foundation deposit, functionally connected to the building because of their situation right in front of the central room (Aigner-Foresti 2000, 277; Bonghi Jovino 2000). However, the objects are not cult instruments, as would be expected for a temple, but they are definitely insignia of the power of a ruler. This raises the question whether edificio Beta could have served as a sanctuary and, at the same time, as the official seat of the ruler – similar to the regia in Rome or to the buildings in Poggio Civitate/Murlo and Acquarossa (Bonghi Jovino 2000, 288–98; Haynes 2000, 26–8; Torrelli 1993).

As mentioned before, the three-cellae room arrangement is also the characteristic element of the ground plans of Etruscan and Tuscan temples – with only the central cela housing the cult image and thus serving the worshipped deity (Fig. 1b) (Dohrn 1977/78; Knell 1983). Obviously, this central room corresponds to the sleeping-place in the early Roman tablinum, said to be the original place of the lectus genialis (Wistrand 1970, 194). At the same time, it is also the canonical burial-place of the deceased husband and wife in the three-cellae Etruscan chamber-tomb of the 6th century, as has already been mentioned in connection with the Tomb of the Shields and Seats in Cerveteri. At the so-called regiae in Poggio Civitate/Murlo and Acquarossa the place in front of the middle room is also of central importance: at Poggio Civitate/Murlo there is a big stone enclosure, while at Acquarossa there is a rectangular depression in the ground. In both cases the function of the

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**Figure 1**

a. Cerveteri, Tomb of the Shields and Seats, 6th century BC (after Prayon 1975, pl. 85, n. 43)
b. Veii, Temple of Portonaccio, late 6th century BC (after Haynes 2000, 206, fig. 169)
c. Rome, Domus 3, late 6th century BC (after Cifani 2008, 274, fig. 244)
d. Marzabotto, House IV, 1, 6, early 5th century BC (after Prayon 1975, pl. 88, n. 18)

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structures is not yet clear, due to the lack of finds.

The solium of the paterfamilias was situated at the centre of the early patrician house, between the fore-court and tablinum (Wistrand 1970, 209) so that a person entering the house must have been impressed by the picture of the patron seated there enrobred in dignity. Livy (V, 41, 8) has left us a vivid description of the extraordinary effect, when, on the occasion of the pillage of Rome in 390 bc, the Gauls intruded into the residences and encountered the old men who had stayed back, alone, in the centre of their houses, clad in splendid official attire.

According to Livy, the old men sat in medio aedium or in aedium vestibulis; Erik Wistrand presumes – rightfully, to my mind – that between the entrance-gate and the house itself there was an open fore-court extending over half the depth of the main area. The old men were sitting at the rear of this vestibulum, in front of the tablinum (Wistrand 1970, 195, 206).

These nobiles in their official vestments are said to have appeared to the Gauls like images of gods, so that, at first, they did not dare to touch them; in fact, the central arrangement of the seat between anteroom and dwelling-area proper corresponds not only to that of the seats in early Etruscan chamber-tombs, but is, in the Roman tradition, also connected with the entrance-area of temples. Thus, according to Virgil, King Latinus receives the Trojan envoys in the roofed entrance of his regia – which is called templum; in the same way Dido receives the Trojans in the entrance-hall of the newly erected temple of Juno in Carthage. But it was not only the paterfamilias, or the king or mythical heroes who received their guests enthroned in the fore-court or the anteroom of the residence or the palace but also Jupiter as host of the other gods. When this conception is transferred, to the Etrusco-Italic temple, the worshipped deity received the believer in the same manner as the king received his guest in the regia and the paterfamilias the visitors and clientes in the domus: not in the interior private part (the cela with the cult statue, the tablinum), but in the entrance-hall of the building.

In the Etruscan temple, the boundary between entrance-hall and cela separated the pars antica from the pars postica, with the posterior part, the pars postica, as the dwelling-area proper, which, according to the Roman tradition, was called aedem or aedes in temples as well as in dwelling-houses. If we now compare the ground-plan of the archaic Etrusco-Italic temple (Fig. 1b) with those of contemporary chamber-tombs (Fig. 1a) or the patrician dwelling-houses of the domus-type (Figs 1c, 1d), it seems to me to be evident that the concept of pars postica and pars antica is also valuable for the layout of these funeral and private structures, with the pars antica as the reception hall.

In addition, the central part of the pars antica was situated at the intersection of imaginary orthogonal axes, with the vista along the access route – entrance-hall – threshold – central cela as the main axis and, at right angles, the vista between the alae through the entrance-hall as the minor axis. This is the system of cardo and decumanus, well known from the Roman limitatio, which the Romans themselves derived from Etruria (Weinstock 1946, 129).

This axisymmetric spatial notion is already apparent in Etruscan grave-architecture of the 7th century; it is rooted in the cosmic idea of the quadri-partition of heaven and the 16 seats of the gods with their immediate impact on worldly goings-on (Edlund-Berry 2006, 118–19; Prayon 1975, 85–91). The atrium house, the topic of this short contribution, was based upon a spatial notion ultimately rooted in religious ideas – even if, in historical times, they were no longer recognized as such. The axisymmetric system not only put its stamp on the Roman atrium house but also more generally on the Roman way of viewing. It is evident in the axisymmetric arrangement of Hellenistic sanctuaries on a slope as at Praeneste, or in Pompeian wall painting, especially of the Second and the Third Style, and it is also partly responsible for the strongly symmetrical way of viewing in Western civilization – even if we are barely conscious of this inheritance. A detailed demonstration of these contingencies would constitute a topic on its own, by far surpassing the scope of this present contribution.

For the present consideration of dwelling-houses, it is important to remember that in the sphere of Greek culture religious as well as societal conditions differed fundamentally from those of the Italic-Etruscan sphere. In Greece, there existed no cosmically based conception of rooms nor the patriarchal-gentillic domestic community that was so characteristic of central Italy. This helps to explain why the Greek dwelling-house as part of the essentially democratic society of the polis took a different route of development from the Archaic period onwards. The same lack of a cosmically based conception of rooms and a patriarchal-gentillic domestic community also helps to explain why Greek art and architecture, so influential elsewhere, in this particular case did not affect the evolution of the dwelling-house in Etruria and Rome.

Notes
1. On the occasion of the colloquium in honour of Sibylle Haynes I am delighted to present this paper to my deserving friend and colleague. Thank you very much, indeed, for the invitation to contribute.
2. Moormann (2001) is very sceptical of the findings and especially their interpretation by the excavators.
4. According to Livy, Roman History, 1, 40, 5 the regia of Tarquinius Priscus already had a spacious courtyard, where numerous attendants used to assemble: ‘ex pastoribus duo ferocissimi delecti ad facinus… in vestibulo regiae quam potuere tumultuosissime specie rixae in se omnes apparitores regios convexit.’
5. Diodorus Siculus, Bibliotheca Historica, 5, 40.
7. For the new excavations of the domus Regia with a core of three cellae and a central cela that opens wide on to the portico in front, supposedly dating back as far as the second half of the 8th century bc, see Filippi 2004, 103–7, figs 3, 6 and Cifani 2008, 125.
8. Suggesting that the ancient sources do not indicate an exact position for the throne.
9. Those old men, however, did not sit on the solium, but on the official seat, the sella curulis.
10. Livy V, 41, 8 and Florus I, 7, 14: ‘patessim passim domos adeunt. Ibi sedentes in curulis suis praetextatos senes velut deos geniosque venerat.’
12. Virgil, Aeneid 1, 505–6; see Wistrand (1970, 206–7) for more examples.
14. Wistrand 1970, 192–6 concludes from the prevailing use of the singular aedem, that the original building behind the fore-court was a one-room megaron. According to the present state of
knowledge, the idea of this as the original shape of the Roman atticum house, which goes back to Patrocrin (Wistrand 1970, 192 fig. i), can no longer be maintained; the (later) atticum house developed from a room arrangement with three cellae. 15 Frontinus, *De agris mensura*, 27 (ed. K. Lachmann); ‘limitum prima origo, sicut Varro descripta, a disciplina Etrusca.’

**Bibliography**


