Lőrinc Timár

The distribution of the Roman domus-type in Gallia

shortened thesis of the dissertation

Thematical consultant: Szabó Miklós, MHAS

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1. The main goals of the dissertation

The present dissertation has the principal aim to obtain an overview of the first period of the provincial domestic architecture in Gaul. This period had its beginning in the 1st century B.C. and it ended in the second part of the 1st century A.D. We have finished our research at the point where the distribution has ended and the later periods were studied only when it was needed. The ideal border line would have been the age of the Flavians because of the parallels in Pompeii. However, we have crossed this chronological boundary.

The definition of the building type comes from Vitruvius: the Greek and Roman house types described by him – referred as atrium and peristyle houses by the modern research – are the objects of the present dissertation. The Vitruvian definition had to be used in a broader context, because the studied houses include some many units which have only a similar floorplan according to the Roman sources but the layout and the decoration of the rooms, their function as well as their spatial connections are the same.

The development of the house-type is an old subject of the arcaeological research. According to our knowledge the atrium house of Etruscan origin emerges in the 5th century B.C. in Northern Italy and the addition of the peristyle can be proven as early as in the 4th c. B.C. The other subtype is the peristyle house. It does not represent the original Hellenistic layout but a variant which has many features – like axial layout and decoration - borrowed from the atrium houses.

The most handful solution for the understanding of the florplan evolution was to examine the houses of Gaul and classify them using the parallels in Pompeii and Herculaneum. Our primary goal was to identify the Italian architectural tendencies – the evolution of the domus type – and to compare them with the data from Gaul. We managed to find links between them as well. We also had a short analysis on the questions of construction and building reconstructions.

2. The methods of the dissertation

We have collected a number of 97 buildings or building floorplan details in our catalogue. The data collection is based on bibliographic research. The lack of proper data proved to be a disadvantage: the older publications are less detailed, the new ones are sometimes just preliminary reports.
The analysis of the catalogue entries resulted in the separation of many sub-types. First of all we had a classification according to relevant floorplan details and we tried to link them to the Pompeian chronology. We could experience that some features like the linear row of rooms, the tripartite room group, the tablinum elevation of symmetrical layout or the appearance of garden piscinae have clear parallels in the sequence of the architectural tendencies in Pompeii.

There are numerous local features as well: the T-shaped atrium, the entrance hall or the broad vestibule are present in the domus-architecture of Gaul from the very beginnings. The presence of the corridors perpendicular to the atrium identified an special transitional building type which is similar to the Villa dei Misteri and the villa of Settefinestre.

The key elements of the urbanization - the regular street grid, the fortifications and the Greek house types - became known in Gaul long before the Roman conquest thanks to the Greek influence. The local derivates of the Greek pastas-house can be identified even in the 1st century A.D. The domestic architecture of Greek type – the non-axial and non-simmetrical peristyle houses – have an interesting development. In Glanum and Ensérune it can be tracked how the the Roman decorative features (like frescoes, mosaics and the impluvium) appear. The Hellenistic influence is present after the Roman conquest too: such an elements are the Rhodian peristyle and the axial peristyle house type. Even the sequence of the entrance hall – peristyle – cenaculum can be considered as of Hellenistic origin. It appears in palaces first but adopted later in the domestic architecture.

The houses were sorted by their floorplans too. There are simple atrium houses with rooms around an atrium tetrastylum, Vitruvian atrium-houses of axial floor plan with peristyle and local versions of the latter. Their gross area ranges from 400 m2 to 1000-2000 m2. The peristyle houses have similar sizes: there are mini-peristyle houses as well as larger ones with an area of 900 m2. The larger houses have two significant types: there are houses with multiple peristyles and porticoes and axial big city houses. This latter type has an area of cca. 2000 m2 and it’s Italian representants are the Casa dei Cervi and the domus under the basilica of Aquileia.

The villas have very different sizes and floorplans: there are simple ones with a pars rustica only and huge ones with compôlex floor-plans.

The palaces are an other category. Their two representants come from Fréjus: both of them is dated to the reign of Augustus. Their floorplan is according to the imperial palace architecture and can be compared to the house of Augustus, the praetoriums of Caesarea Maritima and
Oberaden and the successor of that type are the Domus Augustana and the 2. phase of the villa of Fishbourne.

In the cadre of the dissertation we have took a look at the possibilities of the stilistical dating of the architectural decoration. The most important result is that they appear in Gaul very fast after their invention in Italy. The transformation of the provincial types is also very fast: only the parts of the Corinthian order can be dated.

3. The results

The geographical origin of the houses is not homogene: most of them come from Gallia Narbonensis. Their distribution began in the south of Gaul and they spread northwards. The spreading can be linked to the urbanization of the territory, but we could see at many points that the native aristocracy has adopted the Roman architectural tendencies very early. The remains of the 1st and 2nd fresco styles come from settlements with no or just Latin status like Vaison or Bibracte.

The domestic architecture of Gaul has two possible origins. One of the is Hispania which has been urbanized earlier and there was an internal evolution of the Roman house types as well. The result was a significant decline of the atrium house, the same can be found in Northern Italy. However, a proof for the Italian origin is the result of the epigraphy research which has pointed out that the colonists of the first Roman colonies in Gaul come from Northern and Central Italy.

The building of atrium houses has ceased in the middle of the 1st c. A.D. The border line of their distribution is the middle of the present France. The speed of the distribution played no factor: the most northern houses come from Limoges, Bibracte and Genava: the two latter have houses from the age of Augustus.

The local form of the atrium house replaced the Italian form at the middle of the 1st century B.C. The function of the atrium is replaced by the entrance hall, the tablinum tract disappears and the peristyle gets a linear row of rooms as flanking. The epistyle house undergoes no changes. The beginnings of the building of atrium houses can’t be traced, because their remains were usually destroyed by the Augustan urbanization as well as hidden by the Medieval and Modern cities.

The analysis of the floorplans and building sizes had interesting results. The orientation of the insulae and their sizes are similar and this led to a uniformization. The houses on parcels of similar sizes have similar floorplans.
The Roman domus type is not a definite house type but a structure of various architectural features and spaces. The builders had chosen the always the proper combination for their parcels and needs.

The comparison with the chronology of Pompeii has pointed out that the architectural tendencies in Pompeii are not typical Campanian features. They can be considered as interregional tendencies in the western part of the Roman Empire. The identification of this process is possible only in Gaul because in the neighbouring provinces the development of the domus type was either earlier (like in Hispania) or later (like in Germania, Britannia or Northern Africa).

4. Other publications of the author concerning the thematics of the dissertation:


