

CONSPICUOUS CONSTRUCTION: Social and Political Projections in Middle-Class Greco-Roman Housing



Bibliography



University of Victoria

Why Housing?

The extravagant villas of the Roman aristocracy and the impressive public architecture of Classical Greece are an often studied topic for the examination of private and public life in antiquity. While these architectural achievements are certainly important, examinations of domestic architecture, particularly those dwellings associated with the middle-class, offers a more comprehensive assessment of the social, political, and economic realities of ancient Greece and Rome. What social and political dynamics are reproduced through architecture? How is socio-political power conceived of and aspired to by the middle-class? A close examination of middle-class housing can be used to answer these questions and establish an understanding of the social and political lives of their occupants.

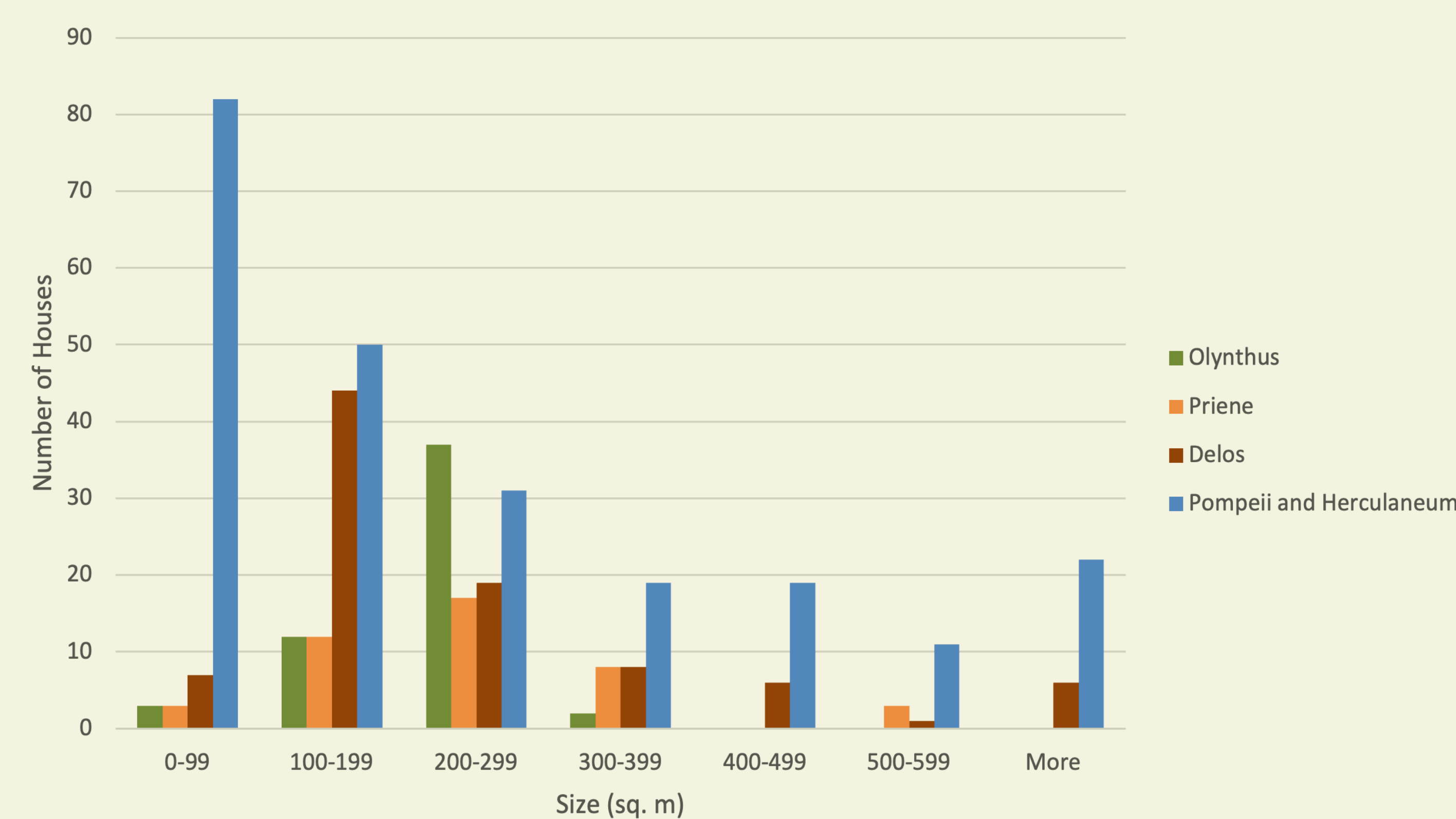


Fig. 2. House Size Distribution (Sources: Wallace-Hadrill, 1990; Kron, 2014)

House Size Distribution and Socio-Political Environments

- Most houses in Olynthus fall in the range of 200-299 m²
- Roman housing in Pompeii and Herculaneum demonstrates a significant gap between the majority of the population who are living in housing less than 100 m² and the minority who occupy palatial villas or large estates
- Differences in status are less discernable based on house size in a Classical Greek context, where only a minority own housing greater than 300 m²; in this case different social conventions, perhaps not based primarily on wealth, dictate how Classical Greek citizens conceived of and projected social or political power.



Fig. 7. Emblemata Mosaic, Ostia



Fig. 1. Dominius Julius Mosaic, Carthage

Spatial Organization and Decoration

- Decoration in Greek housing at Olynthus and Athens tends to be limited outside of the andron, a room associated with feasting and socialization between citizens. (Cahill 2003; Westgate 2007).
- The andron frequently included specialized decoration like painted walls or pebble mosaics depicting mythological scenes associated with drinking and feasting (fig. 4).
- The andron is not always a common feature at every site, especially in the more rural demes (Tsakirgis 2005; Harrington 2021) which might indicate a difference in rural and urban lifestyles (Nevett 2007).
- Urban dwellings often including a single entrance and a layout centralized around a courtyard (fig. 3), while rural housing frequently included two entrances and a sequential arrangement, rather than central courtyard (Harrington 2021).

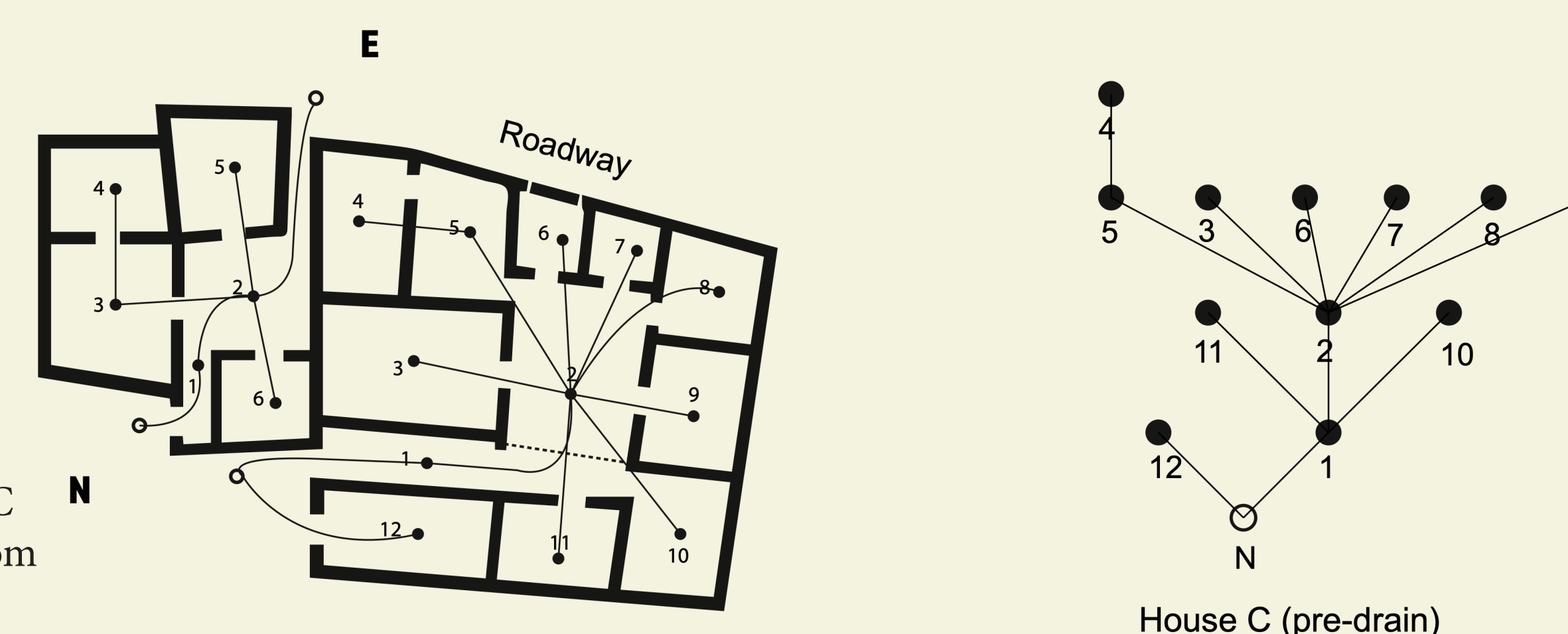


Fig. 3. Map and J-graph of Houses C and D (Adapted from Thompson 1972)

- Roman middle-class dwellings display more lavish décor and often included multiple mosaics, a reception room, and possibly a garden, and a nymphaeum.
- Special features like a nymphaeum, a garden, and sometimes even a bath were added in upper middle-class dwellings even when space was limited, such as with the bath and nymphaeum in the House of the Donkey at Cuicul and the garden and nymphaeum in the House of Cupid and Psyche at Ostia (Ellis 2000; Packer 1967).

- While some dwellings in Ostia display polychrome mosaics, and a few display the more expensive emblemata mosaic type, most middle-class housing in Ostia employs black and white silhouette type mosaics (fig. 5), often including mythological scenes or scenes associated with agricultural labor and hunting. This offered a more economical solution to the expectation of extensive floor décor.
- Attempts to immitate Roman aristocratic housing extends to the provinces, well illustrated by the Dominus Julius mosaic, which displays an ideal projection of a Roman villa, and highlights flora and fauna associated with the Mediterranean more than explicitly local surroundings (fig. 1; Nevett 2010).



Fig. 4. Pebble Mosaic, Olynthus



Fig. 5. Black and White Silhouette Mosaic, Ostia

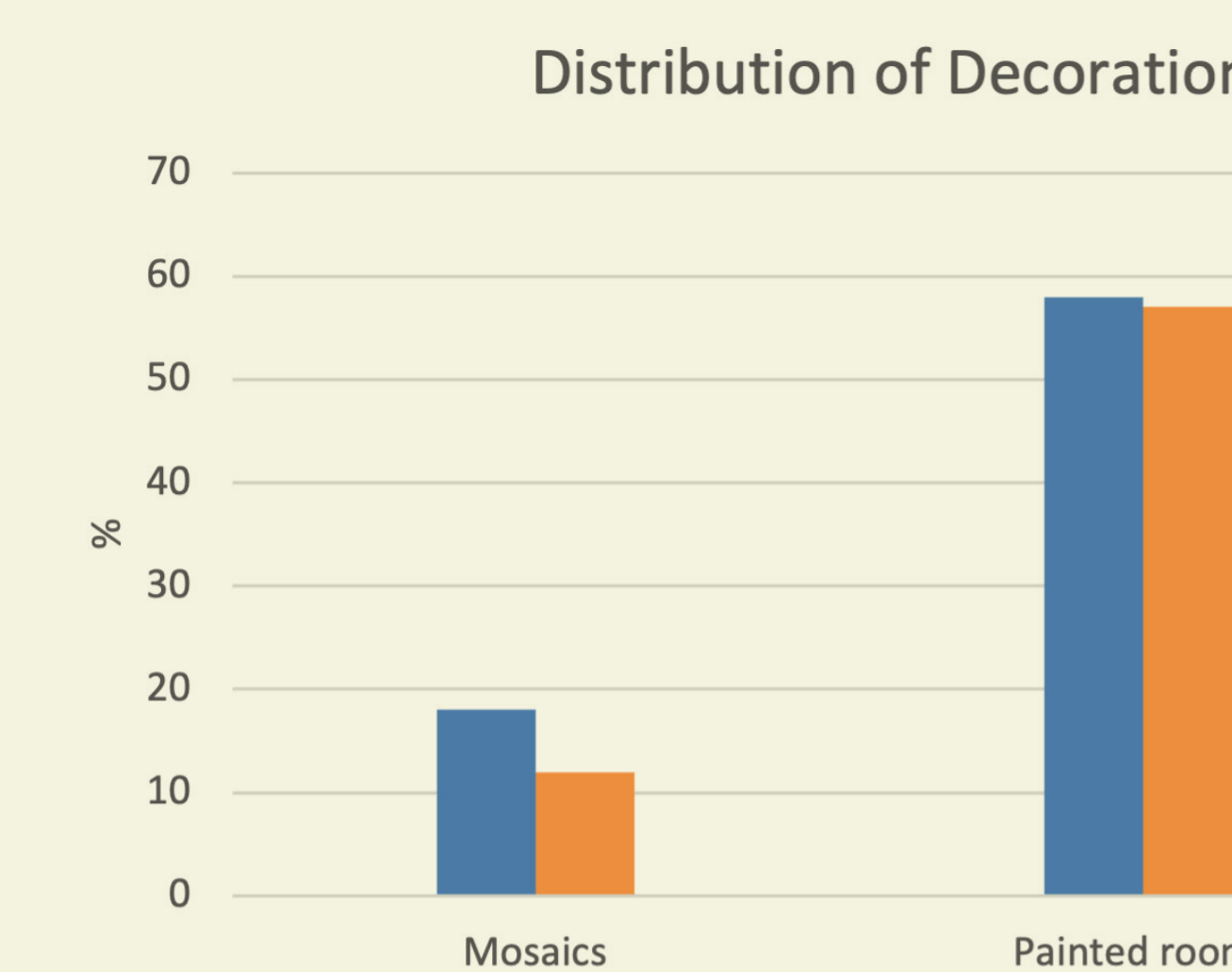


Fig. 6. Distribution of Decoration (Sources: Wallace-Hadrill, 1990; Cahill, 2003)

Constructions and Conceptions of Power

Greek urban housing seems to emphasize internal surveillance, privacy, and sympotic culture, with power articulated by internal control over one's household and a clear separation between private and public possibly associated with the importance of legitimate citizenship and the role of women in the formation of male citizen status (Westgate 2007). Conversely, Roman architecture emphasizes the inclusion of the public into the private, with décor often centered around reception rooms and the inclusions of special features associated with public architecture such as the nymphaeum and garden. Power in this instance seems associated primarily with affiliations to Roman aristocratic culture, which stressed social power through public office, access to wealth, and sometimes leisure activities. Although articulated very differently, there did seem to be overlap in what aspects of one's lifestyle were considered important to the construction of status. Self-sufficiency, for example, seems to have factored into both Greek and Roman understandings of power; themes of agriculture in Roman mosaics and the emphasis on privacy and control in Classical Greek dwellings both illustrate a similar concern with the self-sufficiency of a household. Additionally, both Roman and Greek dwellings generally lacked a clear delineation between places for work or production and other household activities.



Fig. 8 Casa della Fontana Piccola, Pompeii