

# H-Net Reviews

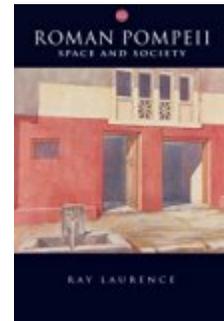
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ray Laurence. *Roman Pompeii: Space and Society*. London: Routledge, 2007. xvi + 216 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-39126-9; \$42.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-39125-2.

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## Surveying Space

The archaeological anomalies that are the Campanian sites of Pompeii, Herculaneum, Boscoreale, Stabiae, and Oplontis have been the subjects of increasing research and publication in the last two decades. Notable recent works, especially those on formation processes, gender markers, and ancient urban development, have stoked both the public interest in these settlements as well as re-popularized them as targets for academic study. The result has been a nigh-unprecedented surge in investigations into the material culture of these places, all in spite of the increasingly limited number of new excavations allowed in the locations surrounding Mount Vesuvius.

Adding to this body of knowledge is the most recent edition of Ray Laurence's *Roman Pompeii: Space and Society*. Laurence considers how Pompeii was a theater of multidimensional social interactions, a hive of human activity that produced the organization and growth of the city. Through an exploration of archaeological evidence, ancient literary sources, and modern comparative models, Laurence endeavors to demonstrate that the city, far from being a rigidly planned settlement, was a shifting entity in constant evolution.

*Roman Pompeii* was first published in 1994 as an expansion of Laurence's doctoral dissertation. This updated and revised edition is an improvement on its predecessor. Laurence has elaborated considerably on his original work. Newly added material includes additional figures and maps and a more extensive bibliography, all of which contribute greatly to the work's thoroughness and

legibility. More significantly, Laurence has also broadly revised the book's second and third chapters, and added two completely new chapters (chapters 8 and 10) to further develop his notion that the city of Pompeii was produced through interactions both social and physical.

The chapters of *Roman Pompeii* are compartmental, and can easily be read independently of one another. This is both a benefit and a detriment to the work as a whole, for it makes the text very legible but sacrifices the conceptual support that would normally span chapters. For instance, the chapter on deviant behavior (chapter 5) would be well served by the spatial analyses introduced later (chapter 7); unfortunately, neither section references the other, and the conclusions drawn in the former seem that much more deficient because of it. This situation is pervasive, and only rarely does Laurence refer back to material that has been previously introduced.

Considering each chapter in sequence, the strengths and weaknesses of the semi-independent sections are readily identifiable. The first chapter, which focuses on urban planning, frames the overarching hypothesis that Pompeii was a social product and not a planned entity. Through an exploration of the competing theories for Pompeian development provided a century earlier by Raymond Unwin and Francis Haverfield, as well as the subsequent city-planning models that have variously been applied to Pompeii, Laurence argues that there is an intimate relationship between Pompeian space and the city's social fabric. Given the surveyed material, this

seems to be a rational deduction, and one that is solidly supported (if not directly revisited) in the following nine chapters. The terminology used for qualifying the statement is not well defined. More than once the reader is left to deduce what exactly constitutes a “social product,” or how much conscious thought on the part of an ancient builder must have been present for investigators today to deem a patterned landscape as “planned.”

The second chapter, which highlights the reshaping of public spaces, generally breaks free from this lexical ailment. Laurence declares that Pompeii was remodeled in the image of a “Roman town” after its colonization by Roman veterans following the Social War (p. 22). Again, the meaning of the phrase is left unstated, but Laurence’s identifications of the developments within the forum, the construction of Pompeii’s amphitheater, and the greater use of architectural marble during the later periods of Pompeii’s history allow the reader to better understand his concept of a “Roman town.” Laurence does not, unfortunately, make reference to the plural identities of other towns or colonies in the empire, many of which would express varying degrees of “Roman-ness” by his criteria. Such an inclusion would add strength to his argument.

The third chapter, one of the most heavily reworked between the two editions, grapples with the concepts of identity and neighborhood. Laurence’s conclusions on the fluctuating local identity of neighborhoods based on the presence or absence of *lares* altars do not seem well substantiated. The evidence needed to make such claims is scant, and the hypotheses, while entirely possible, are tenuous when based solely on that criterion. However, his subsequent analyses of fountain placement, traffic flow, and electoral notices add much more credence to these notions of identity, making the material contained in this portion extremely valuable to the book’s overarching principle of “social space.”

Production and consumption in the city are considered in the fourth chapter, which is one of the best of the entire set. Although Pompeii produced few goods, it did trade with other nearby cities and beyond. These economic operations resulted in a patterning of productive land use, especially in regards to industries such as baking and metalworking. Considering this, Laurence dismisses the “consumer city” model that has been stubbornly applied to Pompeii and chooses instead to highlight the nuanced nature of the city’s economy. As he rightly reminds us, very few examples of urbanism, ancient or modern, can be pigeonholed into a producer-consumer schema.

The fifth chapter, focusing on “deviant behavior,” is significantly weaker than its predecessor. Laurence takes great pains to clarify what he means by the term “zoning,” which he applies when considering the use of space by individuals such as prostitutes and establishments such as bars and taverns. His focus on purpose-built institutions in Pompeii is practical, because transitory individuals left virtually no archaeological marks with which to identify them. Such a focus is inherently limited, however, as even the number of edifices which could be labeled as housing “deviant” activities has historically been in contest. Laurence concedes that there were economic motivators behind such pursuits, although he tends to downplay the importance of such factors when determining the potential geographic distribution for buildings that may be classified as “deviant.” Instead, he asserts that such edifices were specifically located away from the eyes of women and children, their placement due to the direct or indirect control of city space by Pompeii’s elite. While it is almost assured that members of the upper echelons of Pompeian society did have strong if not official roles in suppressing certain behaviors, there simply is not enough archaeological evidence to make such a durable assertion of their particular influence. Laurence also does not consider how individuals engaging in “deviant behavior” may themselves have influenced the locations of their establishments, a dimension that must be taken into account given the direct roles that they played.

The sixth chapter, concerned with the activity of the street and public interaction, is much stronger. Through an analysis of doorway incidence and preserved wall messages, Laurence crafts a highly scientific and exquisitely thorough argument for how space was appropriated and controlled both outside of Pompeian houses as well as in those liminal spaces connecting the public street with the home. As he emphasizes, a higher incidence of doorways and messages tends to reflect higher traffic on such streets, a situation demonstrated nicely through the number of frontages and communication that border the main traffic conduits in the city.

This trend continues in the seventh chapter, appropriately directed at the production of space. Utilizing the data from the previous chapter and a method for determining the relationship of inner-house spaces drawn from Bill Hillier and Mulienne Hanson’s space syntax approach, Laurence explores the connection between the amount of street-side activity and the organization of the Pompeian house. Through an assessment of mean depth, number of spaces, and relative asymmetry within the houses as compared with the outside action frequency,

conclusions about property isolation and the interior of Pompeian homes can be drawn. Although causality may be more fugitive than desired, the positive correlation between several factors is telling.

The eighth chapter, a new addition to this revision, deals with property ownership, addressing the often-assumed theory that all homes in Pompeii were inhabited by their owners. Laurence, demonstrating particular insight, cogently reminds the reader that many different types of ownership and rental situations likely existed in Pompeii. Wealthy owners could (and often did) rent out properties, gaining additional income in the process. The evidence for determining individual circumstances surrounding a building's occupancy are, unfortunately, sparse; artifact assemblage can provide some answers, but it is rarely definitive. The destruction pattern in Pompeii also creates confusion; as people fled at various stages (and, potentially, sought refuge with each other), skeletal distribution in individual locations may also be biased. Laurence's extra-dimensional criteria for the viability of property rental, based on *insula* position and space competition, are especially valuable when approaching this difficult topic.

The ninth chapter, which considers how space is organized by temporal action, is the portion of *Roman Pompeii* that most requires further development. Laurence rightly argues that the actions of the city's wealthy and elite molded the use of space in the city; his explication of this, however, is far too simplistic. He contends that the daily patterns of the elite, from receiving clients to going to the baths to having meals, affected the distribution of public buildings these individuals would frequent. Such temporal activities undoubtedly had an effect on the use of space in the city, particularly in regards to how non-elites came into contact with and interacted with the spaces frequented by the upper social echelons. Laurence understates the importance of all other factors in his claim, however, generating a similar concern to that found in the fifth chapter. His brief consideration of how the non-elite functioned on a daily basis emphasizes this discrepancy, and the influence of this majority of the population in Pompeii is left unexplored.

Thematically based on how urban space contributes to the manufacture of adult citizens in Pompeii, the tenth chapter is the second of the new insertions in the second edition of the book. This segment begins strongly with an erudite exploration of how the city's youth were profoundly affected by their connections with areas such as the gymnasium and amphitheater, which served as

stages for indoctrinating future generations of citizens. As Laurence proposes, the city's youth would realize acceptable social norms through overt interactions with (and covert reactions to) a range of messages delivered through the architecture and decoration in such locales. The discussion of the relationship between learned gender roles and depictions in private homes is compelling, although Laurence's suppositions regarding sexuality in public baths are less so, because of the paucity of corroborating evidence. Laurence touches briefly on grave iconography as related to members of these transitional populations in comparison to the graves of freed slaves, but, unfortunately, he concludes the chapter without a full exploration.

The eleventh and final chapter, which returns to the original thesis expressed in the first chapter and persuasively summarizes the major points supporting it, is the most indispensable. Laurence weaves together several interrelated concepts and shows that these factors working in concert generate a city as both an urban form as well as an inhabited environment. Cities are the results of both social and economic surpluses, and develop by accumulation rather than plan. The landscape and its borders are conceptual, and clear definitions as to what constitutes the city proper are often impossible. The entire framework is overlaid by residents, visitors, and the like, each demographic of which affects the space through their social actions or lack thereof. Accordingly, scholars interested in the makeup of the ancient urban geography would do better not to ponder buildings so much as people, streets so much as networks, and plans so much as growth.

The primary value of *Roman Pompeii* is the number and range of concepts it introduces. Laurence does an exceptional job in approaching the complex issue of ancient urban formation on a variety of fronts. His multifaceted analysis is applaudable, and the conclusions he draws in certain chapters, especially those rooted in statistical surveys of the site, are highly persuasive. These merits are tempered by the brevity of the entire work, a mere 191 pages of text and images, accompanied by 40 pages of prefaces, indices, and bibliographies. With so many ideas presented, Laurence rarely dwells on any singular point for more than a few pages, which both tantalizes and frustrates readers. A longer, more extensive edition of the work is certainly desired, one that elaborates on those notions already presented rather than introducing new avenues for exploration.

Laurence states early at the outset of *Roman Pompeii*

that “what is clear is that Pompeian material culture is cumulative” (p. 6). Readers would do well to bear that lesson in mind as they turn the pages of *Roman Pompeii*, for the same can be said of the research on the subject. As additional investigations into the extinct cities of Campania progress, the ideas put forth by Laurence will invariably become clearer, more elaborate, and even more valuable than they are now.

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