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(Aristocratic) domestic cults in Etruria, Lazio, Magna Graecia, and southern Italy

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PICCIONI, A. 2020. *Culti domestici in Italia meridionale ed Etruria*. Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner. Pp. 272, 123 figs. ISBN 978-3-79843-552-3.

In recent years, there has been an interest in the study of cults in the ancient Mediterranean, with an emphasis on individual experiences rather that collective ones, including aspects of family religion and domestic ritual practices.[1] This study of domestic cults in southern Italy and Etruria is based on the author's doctoral dissertation at Universität Regensburg.[2] Her main objective was to gather a solid base of archaeological evidence of domestic cults in Italy during the 6th and 5th c. BCE, selected according to the criteria of the so-called functional indicators of domestic cult activity.[3] The different types of evidence examined in the book suggest that domestic cult practices were performed not only inside houses, but also in their proximities. Domestic rites vary in form and function, they are often connected with the cult of the ancestors and with the *mundus muliebris*.[4]

As noted by Torelli, research on domestic cults for the Archaic period in Italy focuses on the regions, with many of the cults being strictly sub-regional or site-specific.[5] To some extent, Piccioni's (P.'s) study fills a gap by providing a wider picture that finds more commonalities than differences in domestic cult practices across different regions of the Italian Peninsula. The book is based on a catalogue of 60 examples of material evidence for domestic cults from Etruscan and Latin settlements, Greek settlements of Magna Graecia, and indigenous settlements of southern Italy. Regrettably, the author does not include northern Italy or Sicilian sites, on the grounds of the disparity in urban development of the non-Etruscan peoples in the case of the former, and the socio-political and cultural distinctiveness of the latter. Consequently, the author has missed an opportunity to provide us with a more compelling picture of domestic cults in the wider geographic area. This, of course, does not diminish P.'s detailed examination of the different objects that are indicative of domestic cult and ritual practices in the regions under study. Furthermore, her efforts to better understand the role that domestic cults played in urbanization processes and the creation of elite identities within the community

1 For example, Bowes 2015; Parker 2015; Sekita and Southwood forthcoming. For domestic cults, see Bassani and Ghedini 2011; Bassani 2017 (on Republican Rome); Gasparini et al. 2020; Bassani 2021.

2 Supervised by D. Steuernagel, 2017.

3 Bassani 2021, 209–11.

4 Albanesi and Battiloro 2011.

5 Torelli 2011, 123.

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are illuminating. The volume is divided into three parts, preceded by an "Introduction," in which the author discusses: 1) the catalogue entries, subdivided by region; 2) the typology of the materials; and 3) the evidence, functions, and contexts of domestic cults. The "Conclusions" are followed by summaries of the study in German (225–32) and English (233–32).

In the "Introduction," the author challenges the division established in scholarship between *sacra privata* and *sacra publica* on the grounds that it does not consider aspects of spatial flexibility.[6] For example, ceremonies performed both inside the house and outside but in its proximity should be included within the "domestic" sphere. Furthermore, since we cannot rule out the participation of someone from outside the family, it is not possible to say that domestic cults were strictly "private." Therefore, the author advocates for a household religion (*religione della casa*) of a mixed nature; that is, the spaces where domestic cults were performed were flexible. With the exception of buildings with rooms decorated with relief friezes, houses in Archaic Italy did not have a fixed space for cult practices (19). The archaeological evidence and recent studies on ancient religious practices and the family in antiquity show that, in fact, domestic cults operated within the internal and external realms of the house (15).[7] Furthermore, large aristocratic residences (the so-called palaces), sometimes decorated with architectural reliefs, may have been used for communal rituals, later becoming locations for public temples.[8]

Evidence of large aristocratic residences comes from Acquarossa, Caere, and Murlo in Etruria (cat. nos. 2, 12, and 1, respectively); Regia in Lazio (cat. no. 22), Vito dei Normanni, Braida di Vaglio, Roccagloriosa, and Torre di Satriano in Magna Grecia (cat. nos. 53, 57–58 and 60, respectively); and Conversano in Apulia (cat. no. 46). Other residences located on hills, and therefore in a dominant position, are found in Monte Sannace (Apulia) and Veii (Etruria). These structures were bifunctional: they were not only the residences of leaders and their families but also represented the central power of a *gens* over the community by hosting semi-private and public rituals that still fit into the category of domestic cults.

Catalogue of finds

Part I (*Schedatura*) examines the material evidence for domestic cults according to provenance, with a separate discussion for problematic sites at the end. Etruscan sites (cat. nos. 1–18) include Acquarossa, Caere, Massa Marittima, Pisa-Lucca (*chora*), Poggio Buco, Poggio Civitate, Prato (Gonfienti), Roselle, and Veii. Some interesting material from this region includes the relief slabs from building complexes from Acquarossa, Le Sparne, and Veii (cat. nos. 1, 11, and 12), as well as fragments of acroterial sculpture. Other finds include pits with infant burials, suggesting that (foundation?) rituals were performed there, involving sacrifices, inscriptions, and a consistent use of miniature black bucchero *kyathoi*. Next, P. discusses the evidence from Lazio (cat. nos. 19–25) derived from sites in Ficana, Lavinium, Rome, and Satricum. Parallels with Etruria include relief fragments of decorated friezes from buildings in Ficana and Rome (cat. nos. 20 and 22). Both buildings

6 Brelich 1985, 75.

7 Amann 2010, 33; Parker 2015, 71–80; Faraone 2012, 210–11.

8 Gualtieri and Fracchia 1990, 101; Potts 2015, 31. In what follows, I will avoid the use of the word "palace," often used in the book, and its derivations given its anachronistic nature.

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contained infant burials, one with *corredo*; the other an *enchytrismos* inhumation.[9] From the residence in Rome came also acroterial fragments and an inscription on the bottom of a bucchero cup that reads *rex*. In this case, P. suggests a type of dynastic cult, maybe connected to the divine ascendance of the ruler. The finds from this site suggest it was his private residence (69–70).[10]

Evidence from Magna Graecia (cat. nos. 26–43) comes from Caulonia, Crotone (*chora*), Elea, Locri, Metaponto, Pithecusa/Ischia, and Sibari. Taranto is excluded from the discussion, except for some occasional mentions for comparative purposes (e.g., clay figurines). Some interesting finds for this region include small domestic altars (*arulae*) decorated with fighting animals (cat. nos. 27 and 29) and numerous clay figurines of female divinities associated with the female domestic sphere (e.g., cat. no. 23). Some of these finds have parallels at Italic sites (cat. nos. 44–60); these include Cavallino, Conversano, Lavello, Monte Sannace, Muro Leccese, Roccagloriosa, Rutigliano, San Vito dei Normanni, Serra S. Bernardo di Vaglio, and Sartriano. In some cases, child burials and adult tombs were located inside a house or in the vicinity of a building (cat. nos. 49, 51; and cases A [Gabii] and B [Altamura]). Finally, the author discusses some problematic sites, such as Gabii (A) and Altamura (B), where antenatal and infant burials were located in specific parts of a house.[11] Interesting is the case of house H,2 from Monte Sannace (cat. no. 51), which has three adult burials aligned with the central axis of the house and accompanied by rich *corredi*. The central placement of the burials and their prominence suggests the possibility that these tombs were visible, as confirmed by "domestic" burials found in other structures from this site (cat. no. 49). P. suggests this was a type of domestic *heroon*, where the family could engage in cult practices that reinforced its identity, probably in connection with the notion of Homeric *virtus* (146–48).[12] Although these inferences seem reasonable, the author's conclusions about the indigenous aristocracies' appropriation of such concepts seem to push the argument too far.[13] I will return to this point later.

Typology of the materials

The typology of the materials is the subject of Part II. Here, P. discusses the evidence presented in the catalogue and provides comparative materials from different regions, distinguishing between "active" and "passive" indicators of cult. The first category includes cult objects such as large altars and *arulae*, miniature *kyathoi*, bronze and clay figurines, and vases, in some cases with inscriptions. By contrast, "passive" objects that suggest cult practices are carved reliefs and acroterial sculpture (151).

Perhaps the most evident "active" indicator of cult is the presence of altars. Stone altars of monumental size are found in indoor and outdoor domestic contexts. For example, altars *di ambiente chiuso* were placed inside a room of a house, as at Torre di Satriano (cat. no. 60).[14] By contrast, altars *a cielo aperto* are found, for example, in Acquarossa,

[9] Maggiani 1985, 174; Winter 2009, 271; Rathje 2019, 38–39, 121.

[10] For the inscription, see Stopponi 1985, 188; Cristofani 1990, 22–23, fig. 1.9; Potts 2015, 36.

[11] Potts 2015, 88–89.

[12] For a distinction between a funerary cult and a heroic cult, see Whitley 1994, 214–15, 218, 219.

[13] See also Piccioni 2017.

[14] See Osanna 2013, 124; Piccioni 2017, 26–27.

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Murlo, Conversano, Muro Leccese, and San Vito dei Normanni, in the backyard of a building or in front of it (cat. nos. 1, 12, 46, 52, and 57). These altars were used for the sacrifice of animals ("cruel sacrifices"), followed by a communal banquet where the consumption of meat worked as a fundamental sociopolitical practice that glued the community together (152). Alternatively, small terracotta and mobile altars could be used for the deposition of offerings of different kinds, such as food, perfume, and incense, including as part of domestic funerary cults. They could also become an offering themselves when deposited in pits together with other objects; this practice was observed in the aristocratic residence from Cavallino (cat. no. 45). Some *arulae* bear depictions of fighting animals (bulls, lions, and deer), which find numerous parallels with similar examples from Sicily.[15] While these small altars are more commonly found in Greek settlements from Magna Graecia, at the indigenous sites of South Italy and Etruria, there seems to be a predilection for monumental altars (157).[16] Other altars were made from different types of stones to form tumuli, associated with a cult of the ancestors (*heroa*).

Clay and bronze figurines are also active indicators of cult. Clay figurines of females wearing a *polos*, a veil, or a diadem are largely found in sanctuaries and domestic contexts in Magna Graecia. In the Archaic period, these statues share some attributes with goddesses associated with nature and/or human experience (birth, procreation, death), such as Aphrodite, Artemis, Demeter, Eileithyia, Hera, and Kore-Persephone (162–63). Statuettes, perhaps *Potniai Theron*, hold offerings that connect them with the sacred sphere. Not so clear, however, is the nature of the statuettes wearing only the *polos*. They could represent either a divine entity or a pious mortal and perhaps symbolized a family member's rite of passage. Unique examples are the clay *pinakes* from the *chora* of Metaponto (cat. no. 40), which date to the end of the 5th c. BCE and represent a recumbent couple with an infant.[17] P. relates the scene to a ceremonial banquet, probably in the afterlife, under the protection of Dionysus or maybe Zeus Kataibates. The scene may be indicative of a cult of the dead or hero cult, based on evidence from other sites in Magna Graecia and indigenous regions from southern Italy (97, 166–68).[18] Bronze figurines in domestic contexts were found exclusively in southern Etruria, although they are common in sanctuaries in central and southern Italy (169).

Other "active" indicators of cults are vases, sometimes in miniature, and the inscriptions on them. A practice exclusive to Etruscan domestic contexts is the presence of *kyathoi*. This shape, usually employed in sacred and funerary rituals, is found in small sizes (up to h. 6 cm) and in miniature (h. 3 cm), like the ones in black bucchero from Massa Maritima (Machia del Monte; A, IV), found near a hearth, or the group found inside a *pythos* (B, I). Inscriptions are also revealing. Underneath a temple dedicated to Hera/Herakles in Caere (Vigna Parrocchiale), a residence from the Archaic period was discovered (cat. no. 2).[19] The structure contained obliterated materials, a variety of Attic vases, painted slabs, and two bucchero fragments with the Etruscan inscriptions *apa* (father) and *apas* (of the father),

15 Simonetti 2001, 346.

16 Menichelli 2009.

17 Carter 2006, 133–94.

18 See Lippolis 2006. See also Maddoli 1996, 481–98, esp. 496 (picture of a ritual ax with inscription from San Sosti, 6th c. BCE; cat. no. 131).

19 Maggiani 2001; Bellelli et al. 2003. On the archaic residence and its findings, including the inscriptions, see Pandolfini Angeletti 1989, 74–75, nn. 9–10; Bellelli 2011, 130–36.

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which suggest cultic practice inside the house. An Attic vase found in a residence in Veii (Macchiagrande) and bearing the inscription *fufluna* likewise indicates the practice of a domestic cult, here dedicated to Fufluns/Dionysus (cat. no. 16).[20] As mentioned above, the *rex* inscription from Rome (cat. no. 22) perhaps refers to the ruler of the site and a cult in his honor.

"Passive" indicators of cults are relief slabs and acroterial sculptures. These have been found in domestic contexts in Etruria (Murlo, Poggio Buco, and Vetulonia), Lazio, and Basilicata. They depict animals (fantastic and real), scenes of war, myths, athletic competitions (including horse races), and banquets, like those observed in sanctuaries and necropoleis. Isolated cases show dance/*komos*, a marital procession, and an assembly (178). Friezes from a building in Ficana (Monte Cugno, building 5b) depict galloping horses, soldiers, and chariots (cat. no. 20). The scenes could be related to some kind of rite of passage for young adolescents and their initiation into warfare. At the same time, they were a powerful medium for displaying the ideologies of the local aristocracy and its power (185).[21] More slabs, one depicting the Minotaur, come from Rome (Regia), ca. 570–early 5th c. BCE).[22] Other scenes from myth come from Acquarossa, with Herakles fighting the Cretan bull and the Nemean lion. These heroic episodes were framed by soldiers, chariots, and scenes of dancing and banqueting.[23] Torelli states that placing these slabs with their specific subject matter inside the palatial complex attests to important ceremonial moments that took place there.[24] However, the scenes on the slabs could also have been intended to encourage young male members of the family to complete, like the hero, particular rites of passage. The site of Le Sparne (Poggio Buco, Pitigliano) provides further examples of friezes depicting animals, soldiers, and chariots, perhaps alongside a mythological scene of which only two fragments remain (cat. no. 11).

Original subjects come from Murlo (cat. no. 22), where there is a nuptial procession and an assembly of male and female figures displaying different objects of political and religious power, similar to a scene from the temple of Apollo in Portonaccio (ca. 530 BCE). It has been suggested that the iconographic program of the Murlo slabs could be a representation of the procession to the hill of Poggio Civitate, which was followed by athletic competitions, culminating in a banquet in honor of the ancestors.[25] The building may have functioned as a kind of sacred meeting hall for neighboring communities. A different interpretation proposes that the site was home to one of the members of the Etruscan League and controlled by an aristocratic family who resided there.[26] Overall, P. suggests that the decorated slabs examined in her study mirror specific moments in the aristocratic life, while at the same time being part of a decorative program related to the sacred ceremonies performed in specific rooms of the house (176).[27] Another passive indicator

20 Fulminante 2001.

21 See also Torelli 2011, 153–57.

22 Brocato and Terrenato 2016, 9–11, 13–14, 16–20.

23 See Haynes 2000, 140, figs. 121–22; Strandberg Olofsson 2006, 122–29.

24 Torelli 1983, 481–82; Winter 2009.

25 Edlund-Berry 1992, 204. See also Phillips 1993, 42; Torelli 2000, 73–74, and especially Tuck 2016, 109–13.

26 Edlund-Berry 1992, 11, 198. See also Phillips 1993, 10; Haynes 2000, 123, fig. 103; Graen 2011, 16–17, 19–21.

27 For a functional use of the decorated architectonic slabs, see also Potts 2015, 52.

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of cults, acroterial sculpture, is commonly observed in Etruria and occasionally in Lazio (a sculpture piece that represents a human-scale shoe; cat. no. 22). The sculptures mostly portray human figures, but there are also sphinxes and a dog next to his master that constitutes a unicum in the Italian Peninsula. Like the sphinxes, the dog next to his master (cat. no. 17; fig. 36) would have fulfilled an apotropaic function, as protector of the home and the family (199).

Domestic rituals: forms and functions

In Part III, P. analyses different forms of ritual activity and their functions inside and around the residences. After acknowledging the limitations of a reconstruction of domestic rituals based almost exclusively on the archaeological evidence, she identifies three ritual forms: libations, cruel sacrifice, and non-cruel sacrifice. The first is indicated by vases – such as *kyathoi* – deposited in pits to commemorate a ritual, and the second, "cruel sacrifice," by depositions of organic materials; for example, a ritual meal followed by the sacrifice of an animal in a specific area of the house. The third category of domestic ritual, "non-cruel sacrifice," is evidenced by the deposition of sacred and votive objects.

Next, P. discusses the function of the rituals; for example, apotropaic rituals aimed at preventing a catastrophic event (e.g., protection from lightning, in connection with the god Śuri in Etruria or Zeus Kataibates in Magna Graecia). Other ritual practices were performed to obtain favor from the gods; for example, the deposition of votive figurines, particularly of female divinities near the hearth to assist and protect women and the home. Additional functions of ritual included the cult of the ancestors and purification rites.[28] These were of particular importance during funerary ceremonies, but they were also performed in connection with the *mundus muliebris* and as part of rites of passage. The foundation and refoundation of spaces also required specific rites, as observed in the cases from Gabii and Rome (Regia; cat. no. 22) with infant burials under domestic structures. These ritual practices could be signaled by the accumulation of votive ceramics near the entrance, also observed in sanctuaries from Etruria and Magna Graecia. Finally, obliteration rites were performed before abandoning, closing, or defunctionalizing a domestic space, as observed in Murlo (cat. no. 12) and Gabii (case study A).

Conclusions: the social and sacred roles of the house

The book's "Conclusions" are devoted to the functions of the house as a space where social encounters occurred, providing evidence for the practice of domestic cults that could be celebrated in public or in private. The presence of altars and *naiskoi* in specific rooms of a house, alongside the case studies of domestic tombs, further supports the view that aristocratic houses had a social role during the Archaic period, reinforcing the power of the families who resided there within their communities. The possibility of an acroterial statue representing the owner of Tomb 9 in Monte Sannace (cat. nos. 49–50) is further evidence of the centrality of the heroic cult of ancestors in these houses, which would be relevant to the community. The evidence indicates that in most cases, there is no clear separation between the human and divine spheres. Thus, the author considers the entire house a configuration of a sacred space (219).

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[28] On Śuri, see Sekita 2020. For Zeus Kataibates, see Lippolis et al. 1995, 211–17.

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On the other hand, the architectonic development of urban residences in Archaic Italy dates to the 6th and 5th c. BCE, with the transition from kinship to urban societies. This goes hand in hand with the transition from the aristocratic palace, with its diverse functions, to the building of monumental sanctuaries that boosted a sense of local identity, particularly in Etruria, Lazio, and Italic sites.[29] Regardless of regional variations, a common denominator for domestic cult practices is the presence of clay figurines, vases, and small altars. The evidence shows that in Magna Graecia, domestic cults privileging offerings from the first harvest differed from other regional contexts, where sacrifices were performed. In other words, P. acknowledges that during the time frame of her study, different tendencies coexisted (e.g., huts placed near buildings or large aristocratic residences alongside sanctuaries).[30] Transformations are, therefore, better understood in the light of the heterogeneity and individuality of each site during the period under study.

P. closes her study with a reflection on the duration and repetition of domestic cults, and on the development of temple architecture after them. Certainly, foundation and obliteration rituals happened only once, as largely observed in Italic sites and central Italy, with two cases from Magna Graecia. By contrast, repeated rituals included libations, banquets, and offerings to the ancestors, with the aim of creating a "memory" by means of the objects deposited during the ceremony (224).

Observations

Some problematic aspects of the study deserve attention. One of them is P.'s frequent allusions to the Greek models that shaped the aristocratic ideologies and domestic cult practices in the regions under study: "Le *gentes* etrusco-italiche si inspiravano alle famiglie aristocratiche greche nella definizione del loro potere, derivando proprio dalla Grecia le tematiche che poi furono sviluppate nell'arte locale" (177).[31] This vision is most strongly observed in her assessments of the Italic sites, where she falls into explaining many of the domestic cult practices in the light of "Homeric" values, without much criticism (222). Indeed, later periods feature a lavish display of armor and images of Greek myths depicted on vases of local manufacture found in funerary contexts in Apulia, the Ager Faliscus, and Etruria, particularly during the 4th c. BCE. However, it seems reductionist to explain the complexities of local realities by taking a Hellenocentric approach to interpreting elusive, culturally specific notions (such as "values") that define a people. With no written records to provide contrast to the material findings from, for example, indigenous sites of South Italy, the "values" held by the Peucetian and Daunian elites during the period under study may have well been similar but not necessarily equivalent to the "Homeric *arete/virtus*" proposed by the author.[32]

The main limitation of the research is the nature of the evidence itself. For example, there is an overrepresentation of aristocratic residences in comparison to the lower social strata of the populations considered in the study, which have remained almost invisible

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[29] Camporeale 1985, 81–84; Colonna 2016, 11–12. On the material culture of urbanization and foundation rituals, see Riva 2016.

[30] Izzet 2001.

[31] Pairault Massa 1992, 36–37; Piccioni 2017, 23–25.

[32] See, for example, the remarkable studies by Liseno 2010, 169–78; Lippolis 2013; Pouzadoux 2013, 115–211; Montanaro 2018, 28–38.

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in the archaeological record. This is due to P.'s focus on built structures as *indexes* for the practice of domestic cults, thus providing only a partial view of the realities of domestic cults in the Archaic period. In other words, although the evidence is indicative of cultural exchanges between the elites of different regions under consideration and finds more similarities than differences between them, this study is ultimately a survey – though methodologically impeccable – of aristocratic domestic cults.

A minor formal criticism would be that the numbering of the object categories is not only intricate (e.g., $BS.1_{a\text{-}b}$; $BS.5_{1\text{-}180}$, etc.), but often the information on finds appears to be duplicated; first in the catalogue (Part I) and then in the discussion (Part II). The acknowledgments of the sources that informed the study (1,740 footnotes in total) also seemed perhaps excessive to this reviewer. All the figures in the book are black and white; in some cases, they are too small or illegible but more often than not they fulfill their illustrative purpose. All things considered, P.'s meticulous analysis of the sites with their respective finds and detailed cross-regional comparanda for each category of object will certainly be of great interest to scholars and graduate students of pre-Roman Italy and ancient religion.

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The meanings and value of Late Antiquity

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If any period has struggled to find meaning and value, it is Late Antiquity. As the long-suffering third wheel to Classical Greece and the Late Republic/Early Empire, Late Antiquity is often seen variously as a culture and society of shifting meanings, identities, and values, and as an uninteresting period, only relevant for its relationship to earlier and later history. The field itself has fought to define and promote its own place within Academia.

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