

**Jenn Cianca, *Sacred Ritual, Profane Space: The Roman House as Early Christian Meeting Place*, Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018, 248 pp. 7 b/w illus. \$ 110.00 (cloth) ISBN 9780773553323 \$ 34.95 (paper) ISBN 9780773553330**

**Evanthia Baboula**

Volume 45, numéro 2, 2020

Approaching Home: New Perspectives on the Domestic Interior  
Vers la maison : nouvelles perspectives sur l'intérieur domestique

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073946ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073946ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

#### Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

#### ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

#### Citer ce compte rendu

Baboula, E. (2020). Compte rendu de [Jenn Cianca, *Sacred Ritual, Profane Space: The Roman House as Early Christian Meeting Place*, Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018, 248 pp. 7 b/w illus. \$ 110.00 (cloth) ISBN 9780773553323 \$ 34.95 (paper) ISBN 9780773553330]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 45(2), 143–145.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1073946ar>

these small religious objects, and that badges were sewn onto the vellum to mark favourite passages.

In Part Six, “Gendering Devotion,” Debra Kaplan opens with a look at Jewish practice in the Holy Roman Empire, and the complex overlap of domestic and communal spaces. By parsing texts, objects, and practices, including the imagery of a silver bride-gift, Italian custom books with block-printed illustrations, baths, devotional rooms, and the baking of family bread in communal or Christian-owned ovens, Kaplan determines that the gendered centrality of religion (rather than the home itself) gave meaning to work, study, and daily devotions. Hildegard Diemberger examines the life of Chokyi Dronma, an elite Buddhist woman who married, gave birth, and entered a monastery in fifteenth-century Tibet. Hers is the oldest known Tibetan biography of a female spiritual master. Passages recounting her daily prayers and family struggles show that domestic lay devotions “offered a powerful framework within which a woman could deal with the wide range of challenges that shaped her life” (349).

In a comparative sense, this book’s chapters demonstrate that public conventions of spiritual authority and government are frequently set aside in favour of the creation of a different “religious reality” outside monastery, mosque, and church. Each author opens up connections between material culture and religious practice with attentiveness to the personal-private devotions of individual believers via their small, collected objects and sacred pursuits. Comparative approaches to private piety embrace the materiality of texts, diaries, devotional objects, paintings, and furniture. These essays are the strength of the book and provide fascinating analyses while contributing new interpretations of objects that are little studied, in some cases precisely because they were created and used in acts of private piety. This spotlight on devotional objects

outside elite and church patronage circles constitutes the larger contribution of the volume to the literature, rather than the notion of what constitutes domestic devotions on the world stage. ¶

Angela Andersen is an architectural historian and museum professional. She is a fellow at the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria.  
—ala@uvic.ca

Can Gündüz is an architect and sociologist. He is an instructor in the Department of Architecture at Izmir Institute of Technology in Turkey.  
—cangunduz@iyte.edu.tr

1. Maya Corry, Marco Faini, and Alessia Meneghin, eds., *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 2018); Abigail Brundin, Deborah Howard, and Mary Laven, eds., *The Sacred Home in Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). See [http://domesticdevotions.lib.cam.ac.uk/?page\\_id=846](http://domesticdevotions.lib.cam.ac.uk/?page_id=846).

---

Jenn Cianca

*Sacred Ritual, Profane Space: The Roman House as Early Christian Meeting Place*  
Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2018

248 pp. 7 b/w illus.  
\$110.00 (cloth) ISBN 9780773553323  
\$34.95 (paper) ISBN 9780773553330

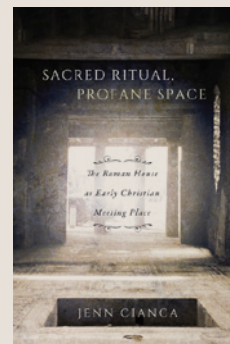
Evanthia Baboula

---

Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework, Jenn Cianca’s *Sacred Ritual, Profane Space* is concerned with how the (Roman) houses of the earliest Christians could accommodate their new cultic practices. Presuming that not everyone converted to Christianity at the same time, what attitudes did the concept of “pollution,” by earlier or continuing non-Christian rites, engender? The book attempts to build a theory of early Christian space by emphasizing the human agency in environments that encompassed cultural contradictions by housing

monotheistic along with polytheistic rituals.

The author acknowledges the problem of the paucity of material evidence that might prove or disprove the views presented. It is well known that in its first two centuries of existence Christianity spread quickly, although it did not yet seem to have developed a distinctive material culture and therefore its own exclusive visual forms. Christians seem mostly to have used pre-existing artistic forms and manufacturing traditions, on the way imbuing these with new meanings. This process also did not happen uniformly across the vast Roman empire. Specialized Christian spaces first find their way into the archaeological record from the middle of the third century but are sparse and scattered until they become more numerous in the fourth century.



Given that a very important part of the affiliation to Christianity was the consumption of communal meals and that textual sources indicate the use of house-churches, the converted Romans therefore in all probability used houses for cultic purposes, at first without much or any adjustment to their interior spaces.

To address the scarce material remains, the first three chapters lay out the types of dwelling in which the earliest Christians may have congregated. The diversity of possible spaces, according to the author and much scholarship from the 1990s onwards,

suggests that people with diverse socio-economic identities were involved in the use of house-churches. Cianca then looks at how the Roman family played out the ideals of Romanitas. Following scholarship on the ideological trappings of the Roman family and its gender constructs, Cianca contends that to live in or run a Roman house meant adopting the many social and sacred rituals that made the house a quintessential building block of Roman identity and, by extension, the empire. She finds that the careful maintenance of Roman identity was inseparable from the practices attributed to the “polytheistic” domestic cult, which was dependent on varied built-in or portable features such as niches, shrines, and portable altars. As a body politic, the Christian Roman house thus necessitated co-existence of Christian worship with, rather than negation of, pagan ritual.

Chapters Four to Six are more varied in content. In Chapter Four the author summons texts and material evidence to demonstrate that Christians indeed accepted the survival within the same spaces of pagan elements of practice vis-à-vis monotheism. Cianca uses two relatively late case studies, Dura Europos (mid-third century) on the eastern border of the empire and Lullingstone (fourth century), Kent, in the west, to support the supposition that house churches of the earliest Christian times witnessed similar admixtures. Chapter Five delineates the Christian rituals performed in house churches, and focuses on the shared meals that created community and a sense of identity. Chapter Six is an overview of theoretical views of ritual space, focusing on the concept of the embodied space. Applying this to the earliest Christianity, Cianca suggests that spaces were made sacred by people, and that Christians negotiated their identities, implying that these were neither fixed nor necessarily exclusive.

The author’s presentation of the house-church laudably supports a view that early Christianity comprised diverse forms of Christian practices and identities that were in flux, and therefore discredits our belated views of a religion that was fixed right from its beginnings. This is in agreement with art historical views of scholars such as Robin M. Jensen and Jas Elsner (who is not cited, while greater usage could be made of Paul C. Finney’s *The Invisible God*). Yet, although some early Christians seem to have had exploratory attitudes to monotheistic practices, there were also strict adherents to abstention from idolatry. It seems logical to wonder whether all converting Romans were equally confident in their affiliation to a shifting Christianity as they were, according to the book, to their claim of Romanitas—and vice versa.

A greater problem, nevertheless, is the need for methodological consistency. In the historical disciplines, writing about a time that has left few material or visual remains means one should always be aware of both the evidence fissures and the need to identify clearly the assumptions that underwrite interpretative models. In cases where the available literary evidence not only fills essential gaps but is also laden with the weight of subsequent centuries of religiously fuelled understandings, it is especially important to build a solid methodological frame on which to reconstruct the past.

The author, on the one hand, goes to considerable effort to define terminology, using the term “house-church Christianity” while also preferring “polytheism” to “paganism.” Somewhat problematically, though, the research largely rests on “typical Romans” (35). Who are these “typical Romans” and what, by implication, makes a Roman atypical? We are told that the book is not examining the practices of Jewish converts, but how are we to know how to distinguish their houses, especially in the Roman diaspora? This inequity makes

the reader wonder if there are determinants other than basic architectural features that define what is a Romanitas-reinforcing Roman house and what is not. Finally, how can we understand “typical Romans” through these most atypical of Romans, namely the Christians of Dura Europos? These issues of methodology should be made clear to the reader.

If these matters had received enough focus, the book could potentially have gone further and extended its argument to see the *domus* as providing the stable ground (physically and metaphorically) that made the multiplicity of religious practices within its walls meaningful. Christianity would thus be one of many such cultic forms that may have become not merely active but even possible due to the identity-shaping role of the *domus*. Such an argument would have made the author’s job of using the Roman house and its evidence of ritual furnishings more relevant to comparison with the later material remains of Christianity. In that case, what would be of greatest relevance is the change in the dynamic between the developing needs of Christianity and the *domus*, itself not a fixed environment.

Another area that needs greater attention lies in the links between the funerary and the domestic context. Even though the early forms of the important rituals of baptism and the Eucharist are not well understood, they were inextricably connected to death and resurrection. In addition, it has for long been recognized that pagan iconographic elements survived after Christianity became the sole religion of the empire. For early signs of such admixtures, one could turn to the combination of “pagan” and Christian imagery on silverware and sarcophagi and the fact that the motifs used were not necessarily exclusive to the domestic or funerary world. The idea that the use of space did not need to be exclusive to a religion is not new either. Indeed, Christian holy sites in many cases grew on previously consecrated ground. The

difference in house-churches in comparison to later spaces is that there is no prior sacred space or miracle to suggest sanctity. The author rightly tries to refute any assumptions that absence of evidence of sacred articulated space in the domestic sphere should translate to evidence of absence (128). Cianca argues that sacrality in the house is tied to the pagan domestic cult and that Christianity comes to supplement it rather than antagonise it.

The book suffers from a lack of illustrations, of which there are only seven. This absence affects some important points. For example, in order to judge the significance of a piece of plaster moulding that was retained in the “assembly hall” of the Dura Christian building from its time as a house, one has necessarily to refer to the original publication of the excavation; one must also do some detective work in order to understand Cianca’s numbering of the images (slightly different to the original image numbering), and to determine which image is the relevant one (the original includes a photo that is presented upside down, which could have been pointed out). The author also mentions that recent photos do not show the moulding in situ (204, n. 39), but does not cite these photos. Had some more careful information and a simple drawing been provided, the reader could focus on the main point, which is that pagan imagery was still relevant in a certifiably Christian space in the third century. This, however, also touches on how the book throws significant evidential weight on archaeological finds that were not published in detail, or on portable finds that do not have accurate findspots. Such material cannot solidly support inferences for the whole of the Roman empire.

Concerning this same example, the use of Dionysiac motifs in early Christian art is well known. The fact that the particular combination of motifs was obviously a product of a Durene workshop that worked for

many buildings across town should also not make us dismiss possibilities other than the acceptance of pagan elements into Christian practice. For example, contrary to the book’s argument, we could claim that Christians may have left the fragmentary moulding in place to remind them of the error of idolatric ways. Whatever the answer, it is important that a unique site should at least be located in a fuller context and presented in a less haphazard manner. Dura was full of houses and cultic sites, including the decorated synagogue and *mithraeum*, and the town was a military outpost between two major, warring empires. What is missing is the larger picture of the synchronous development of other cults. While churches are absent in the first three CE centuries, for example, one needs no reminder that synagogues are not plentiful either. Lastly, if we are to use later evidence to support conclusions about the earliest Christianity, why not select more widely? The Lullingstone Villa is post-Constantinian. There could have been other choices, going as far as including the use of Christian houses for “pagan”-type burials and funerary ritual in seventh century Sicily (site of Kaukana).

Important points in the endnotes could find a place in the main text, while a minor but easily avoidable inconsistency is that the text jumps continuously between “data” as plural and singular (for example, page 73 includes “data are,” “data were” and “data seems”). Barring the methodological issues, though, the book commendably puts together a multitude of diverse sources to explore the meaning of spaces in a challenging context. As a whole, the book is easy to read and shows the potential of the author to add much more to the subject in the future. ¶

Evanthia Baboula is Assistant Professor in the Department of Art History & Visual Studies at the University of Victoria, and is also serving as the Associate Executive Director, Division of Learning and Teaching Support and Innovation.  
—ebaboula@uvic.ca



Brian Carter, ed.  
**boundary, sequence, illusion: lan Macdonald Architect**

Halifax: Dalhousie Architectural Press, 2019  
135 pp. colour illus.  
\$39.95 (paper) ISBN 9780929112725

Menno Hubregtse

In his architectural practice, lan MacDonald has concentrated on designing houses with floor-to-ceiling windows that frame particularly fine vistas of each site’s natural landscape. *boundary sequence illusion* examines how his Toronto-based firm, lan MacDonald Architect (lMA), situates the house within the property and organizes the interior layout to achieve this aim. The book is the first monograph on MacDonald and lMA. Like other books in Dalhousie Architectural Press’s *Documents in Canadian Architecture* series, it includes a generous number of illustrations to elucidate the architectural firm’s design processes. Like Hannah Jenkins and Avi Friedman’s *Canadian Contemporary: The Northern Home* (2018), *boundary sequence illusion* is a welcome addition to the literature on recent Canadian dwellings. The book not only seeks to position lMA’s designs within broader debates on contemporary residential architecture, but it also considers fundamental questions regarding how we experience the building’s interior.