

3 To what extent is the divide between public and private life reflected in Roman Italy? (Part 2)

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Temples and Ritual

Temples were obviously divided into public and private areas, in a similar way to houses. Temples as we see them today are generally in a state of ruin, with none of the walls remaining and often only a few columns. This often gives the misleading impression of being very open structures. As we can see from the Temple of Romulus from the forum in Rome, temples would have been enclosed buildings with doors that could be shut to preserve privacy (Figure 1). Even when the doors were open, the cella was still a private area and as many temples were built on a platform it would not have been visible from the street. Temples connected to mystery cults seem to have required privacy. The Mithraeum of the Severn Spheres in Ostia was built behind the Republican Sacred Area. It is easily visible now but would not have been when the other temples were standing. The Temple of Isis in Pompeii was surrounded by a large wall so that non-initiates could not see into the temple from outside.



Figure 1 – Entrance of the Temple of Romulus, Rome (Credit: author).

The most obviously public part of a temple is the altar. In many places they are situated on the stairs leading up to the entrance, almost on the street. Animal sacrifices would have been visible to anyone walking past and the ceremonies may have regularly blocked streets (Figure 5). This is similar to the semi-public nature of private sacrifices within the home. Sacrifices to Vesta were made after the first course of the mid-day meal and it is likely that the whole family would have been present (Grant 1970, 57). Houses generally had household shrines, used to worship household gods called ‘Lares’. The shrines are a similar shape to temples and are often beautifully decorated (Figure 3).

Although the Lares were household gods and therefore within the private sphere of life, Pompeii has a large public temple dedicated to them within the forum. The sanctuary seems to have been dedicated to them as guardians of the city, rather than the home. As the Lares protected the private family and household, the public Lares protected the city as one large household (Woolf 2003, 206).

Private religion was also practised in public temples, as individuals could make their own offerings. The temples themselves were considered offerings when built by an individual, but offerings included things like statuary, pottery and altars. Models of body parts were commonly offered at temples dedicated to Asclepius in the hope that the god would heal them. These included models of genitalia which are related to fertility problems (Figure 4). Offerings to Isis from sailors are known in connection to her role as 'Isis Shipsaver'.

Altars were also commissioned by private citizens either as offerings to the god to which they were dedicated or as funerary altars in honour of the dead. The most important altar in public worship in Rome was the Ara Pacis. Erected by the Senate in place of a triumphal arch to honour Augustus' return from Italy, it shows the emperor as high priest of the city and is dedicated to peace as a goddess (Figure 5). It was not purely decorative and would have been used for sacrifices during public festivals. Originally it was in the Field of Mars and would have been in view of the Pantheon, a temple dedicated to all Roman gods. The Ara Pacis also had political connotations. Showing Augustus as high priest indicates that he is the man who restored traditional religion to Rome. The obelisk also placed in the Field of Mars was a monument to Apollo and it has been calculated that on Augustus' birthday, its shadow would have pointed at the centre of the Ara Pacis, suggesting that his birth brought an era of peace (information from Museo Dell'Ara Pacis).



Figure 2 – Household altar in the House of the Large Fountain, Pompeii (Credit: author).



Figure 3 – Votive offerings found in the Tiber (Credit: author, Figure 4 – Temple of Fortuna Augusta showing the altar, Pompeii (Credit: author)).

So...does the archaeological evidence for public worship reflect the divide between public and private life? I believe the answer is yes, but only to a certain extent. The division of space within temples reflects that of private houses in that both have public and private areas, where the private areas are only accessible by certain people. In the case of temples, the cella is only accessible by the priest or priestess. The practise of 'showing-off' one's wealth and piety in public is also reflected in things such as the commissioning of temples or offerings. In Roman houses, the most elaborate decoration is generally in the public areas so that visitors would see how wealthy you were. In a similar fashion, being able to commission a temple or an elaborate altar shows publically your wealth and dedication to the gods.



The Ara Pacis (Credit: author).

There is also evidence that seems to blur the public and private divide somewhat. The Shrine of the Public Lares in Pompeii is a public shrine to what are usually private, household gods. The fact that the shrine is in the forum, next to the Temple of Vespasian and close to the Temple of Jupiter shows that it was obviously a popular public cult as well.

Bibliography

1. Grant, M. (1970) *The Roman Forum*. London.
2. Woolf, G. (2003) *Cambridge Illustrated History of the Roman World*. Cambridge.