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**On the Structure of Roman Houses and their Ornamentation with
Tesselated Pavements and other decorations**

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ON THE STRUCTURE OF ROMAN HOUSES & THEIR
ORNAMENTATION WITH TESSELATED PAVEMENTS
AND OTHER DECORATIONS.

BY THE REV. PREBENDARY SCARTH, M.A.

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No county in England is richer in Roman remains than Gloucestershire, and none have yielded a better harvest to the efforts of the investigation of those remains in past and in present times.

Not to mention Gloucester, with its traces of Roman occupation, its walls, pavements, and other indications of former importance, and the fact of its having been a Roman colony, with the many remains of villas that surround it,—and Cirencester with its well-defined walls, and beautiful pavements, and the many inscribed stones, as well as articles of Roman use which are deposited in the museum at Cirencester—there are dispersed along the course of the ancient roads, the remains of villas of more than passing interest,—large in extent, and yielding specimens of the most finished art in mosaic work.

It will not, therefore, be out of place at a meeting like the present, to venture some remarks upon the conditions of life, and the character of the times, to which these remains carry us back.

Much attention has been paid in recent times to the study of the remains found on the sites of Roman villas, but much more yet remains to be known, and the structure and the ornamentation of them has hitherto rested too much upon mere conjecture. It will be my purpose, therefore, in the few remarks I have to make, to endeavour to throw some light upon these points. Altars and inscribed stones have been carefully recorded, and historical information has been drawn from their examination. I will not, therefore, touch upon these further than they may serve to illustrate the object I have in view.

It has been observed by a leading authority on Roman antiquities, and one well entitled to speak on such a subject,—“that it cannot be denied that the study of antiquity moulds and enlightens the human intellect in a manner which sometimes guards it from making serious and deadly blunders.

When we once see that the circumstances under which Englishmen are now led to carry out great works both in literature and in arts resemble those which developed and modified Roman energy, then we cannot help feeling a great interest and value in the study of this branch of Roman history.”

The importance of Britain as a province of the Roman empire has been well, though only imperfectly, dwelt upon by Professor Mommsen in his late work on the “Provinces of the Roman Empire.” He observes that “the internal condition of Britain, must, in spite of the general faults of the imperial government, have been, when compared with other regions, not unfavourable. If the people in the north knew only hunting and pasturing, and the inhabitants there were always ready for feud and rapine, the *south developed itself in an undisturbed state of peace*, especially by means of agriculture, cattle rearing, and working of mines.

. . . . The network of roads was uncommonly developed, . . . the British troops were reckoned alongside of the Illyrian as the flower of the Roman army at the very beginning. Seven cohorts were raised from the natives, and were constantly increased onward to the time of Hadrian. There was an earnest and brave spirit in the people.”

This statement, drawn from historical records, is certainly confirmed by the remains of Roman occupation in the south and west of Britain, where we have not only the fortified camp, but the remains of villas, and the traces of agriculture, and the reclamation of land, and the vestiges of extensive mining, as well as the introduction of plants and gardening.

The villa of the Roman officer, or official, was a wonderful advance upon the hut of the native, and, from recent discoveries in Wilts and Dorset, made by General Pitt Rivers, we have reason to think that the natives soon imitated the example of their conquerors.

Before entering upon any description of the form and adornment of the Roman villa in Britain, it may be well to say something about the original Roman house and its arrangement. Those who would study the subject more fully, may be directed to Castle's *Villas of the Ancients*, and to Dr. Daubeneay's *Lectures on Roman Agriculture*.

Mr. Burn in his recent vol. on *The Relation of Roman Literature to Roman Art*, remarks that "in domestic Architecture as well as in civil, the Romans borrowed the most ornamental and luxurious parts of their houses from the Greeks"—their peristylia, their triclinia, œci, exedræ diætæ, sphæristeria, pina-cothecæ, and bibliothecæ, are all of Greek derivation, as their names shew, but all these belong to the *unessential and extraneous apartments* attached for the sake of recreation to the normal Roman house.

"In the primitive times of Rome the houses of the citizens consisted of one principal central room, the atrium, round which the other parts were grouped. In the atrium all domestic transactions took place; the family hearth, and the image of the Penates were there, meals were taken there, the mistress and her slaves worked there, the kitchen was there, the waxen masks of ancestors, the marriage bed, and the money-chest of the Paterfamilias stood there, visitors were received, and it was in all respects the COMMON ROOM of the house. The name *atrium* is probably Etruscan,¹ and the primitive Atria were such as Vitruvius describes under the name "*Cavædiu Tuscanicum*, a large room, with a roof supported on four beams, two placed across from wall to wall, and two others at right angles to them, so as to leave a square opening in the centre, towards which the roof sloped down on all four sides from the walls. The opening in the centre was possibly in the earliest times only as a vent for the smoke, but as the Atrium became enlarged, it took the form of the impluvium.

In the course of time, most of the domestic acts originally performed in the common hall were transferred to separate rooms, and the Atrium came to be used only for the reception of guests, for the symbolical marriage bed, for the images of ancestors, and for the lying in state of the dead.

¹ See Varro, L. L. V., 161.

The extension of the Atrium naturally caused the introduction of columns to support the roof, which had been unnecessary in the old fashioned Atria.¹

The enlargement of the dwelling house at Rome is contemporaneous with the enlargement of the empire. Horace asks : ²

Cur invidendis postibus et novo
Sublime ritu moliar Atrium ?
Cur valle permutem Sabina
Divitias operosiores ?

In after times the ATRIUM was left as the reception room for clients and visitors, while another and larger court was built beyond it for the use of the family ; this was called the *Cavaedium*. The space between the Atrium and the Cavaedium was filled up by a central square room called the *Tablinum*, where family records and documents were kept, and on each side of it were passages,—fauces,—which formed the communication between the Atrium and Cavaedium.

The Cavaedium was only a repetition of the Atrium on a larger scale. These two were the central points to which the other parts of the house converged, and into them the *cubicula*, or sleeping chambers, and the *culina*, or kitchen, opened, and received light and air through the doorways. The room devoted to the Penates, or household gods, after their removal from the Atrium, was called the *Sarcarium*, and was usually on the left of the Atrium.

This was the *typical* or *national* Roman house, but in after times the form was varied, and it would be tedious to point out the successive changes.

The beautiful Roman villa uncovered at Woodchester, and so well described and delineated by Lysons, fulfils the conditions of the Roman house just described, and those at Lydney and at Chedworth and other places in a greater or less degree. The walls remaining only to a certain height, and often destroyed to the foundation, leave only a very imperfect idea of the wall-painting and ornamentation of the rooms, portions of the plastering still remain to show that they were painted after the manner of the

¹ See Rom. Lit. and Art, by the Rev. Robt. Burn, M.A., LL.D., 1838.

² C. iii., I., 45.

houses in Pompeii. We are therefore obliged to infer from the graceful ornamental pavements which remain, what must have been the style of wall-decoration of the chambers. The question is often asked if the houses in Britain had an upper story?

It is well known that the houses built in Rome had several stories, and that it was necessary to limit this height by law. The height to which they were carried is satyrised by Juvenal: ¹

Tablata tibi jam *tertia* fumant, Tu Nescis.

and again :

Quod spatium tectis sublimibus unde cerebrum
Tecta ferit.²

Mr. Burn observes "that the houses at Pompeii were mostly small and mean, and of the simplest plan :—scarcely any of them had upper floors, with the exception of those placed on sloping ground, where the first floor formed a kind of receding higher terrace.

The fear of earthquakes, and the facility with which extensions could be made on the ground floor, probably prevented the Pompeians from building lofty houses."

The latter was, doubtless, the reason why the Roman houses in Britain cover generally so large a space of ground, and we find so many small rooms on the ground floor.

Doubt has been cast upon the use of glass in Romano-British houses, but sheet-glass has, undoubtedly, been found on their sites.³ This was the case at Tockington and in Bath, on the site of the present Grand Pump Room Hotel, when the foundation was laid. The subject is discussed by the German writer, Hirt,⁴ who considers the expression "*Specularia*" to mean *glass windows*, *specularia vitra*. The Palace of Caligula at Rome seems to have had glass windows, and in the public baths at Pompeii a bronze casement with panes of glass was found.⁵

We are not to suppose that the roofs of the Roman houses in Britain were flat, they appear to have been always gabled and covered with shingles or thatched with straw ;—the quantity of shingles or roofing stones found on the site of most villas proves

¹ Sat. III., 199.

² Idem, 269.

³ Wright's C.R. and S., p. 170. ⁴ Gesh. der Bank, III., p. 1, Bailage.

⁵ See Burn's Roman Lit. in relat'on to Roman Art, p. 304.

that they were gabled, and the paintings of Roman houses in Pompeii represent them so in Italy. Flat roofs were also used for large houses, and were planted as gardens.

At Rome there were two classes of domestic buildings, the *Domus* and the *Insula*, the latter consisted of flats for dwellings, such as are now becoming (?) common in London, but which have long been known in Edinbro' and in foreign cities.

The recent discoveries made at Tockington, so well and carefully described by Sir John Maclean in Vol. XII., part 1, of the Transactions of this Society, are not sufficiently advanced to enable anyone to say the purpose for which the house was designed. There evidently remains much more to be uncovered, if means can be provided. The plan cannot yet be satisfactorily ascertained, like that at Lydney or Woodchester, but the execution of the pavements and the number of the chambers point to a residence of no ordinary kind, and probably occupied during a considerable period.

The appropriation of the site in mediæval times is a proof of its being well chosen, and the decorative art of the pavements point to an early period, and manifests the same taste and skill as those found in and around Cirencester. Decorative pavements imply elegant costly fittings, and choice furniture, as bronze couches and tables, and the polish of luxurious living.

At any rate, what has been done already at Tockington has added another villa of no common interest to the many found in the county, and every discovery thus made contributes something to our exact knowledge of the condition of this Island under Roman rule.

It is to be regretted that no standard work has yet appeared treating of the many beautiful pavements discovered in this county. A work treating on Romano-British Mosaic Pavements has recently been published, but it only treats of a portion of those hitherto discovered, and omits entirely some of the most interesting, as those found at Lydney. Not more than sixty sites are recorded, and in these 183 pavements; many from the sites of Roman cities, but even these are not all given.¹ We are glad,

See Romano-British Mosaic Pavements, by T. Morgan, F.S.A.

however, to welcome that as the harbinger of some future effort. It is a happy thing for this county that the beautiful remains of Roman art at Cirencester should have found such able illustrators, but much remains yet to be done before this subject of Mosaics has been exhausted, and practical results obtained from its investigation.

Mosaics are now becoming much more common in the floors and walls of buildings, and the art might be extended with advantage.
