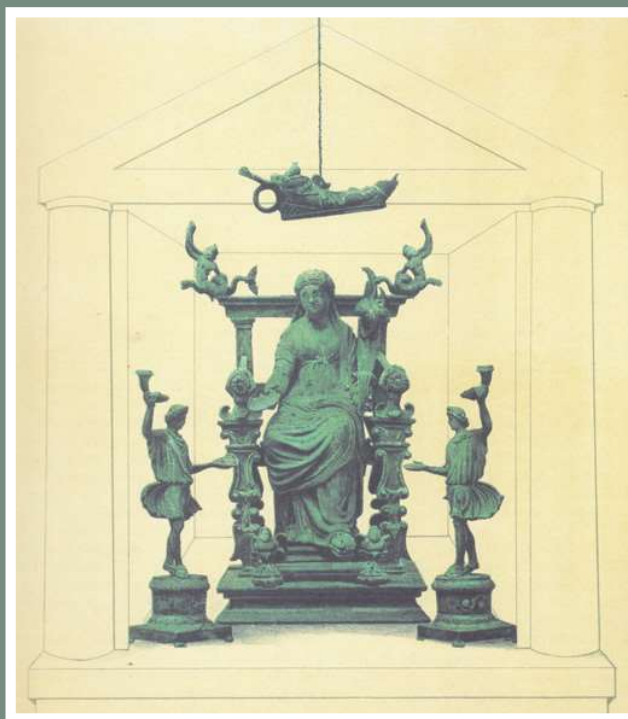


TANGIBLE RELIGION

MATERIALITY OF DOMESTIC CULT PRACTICES
FROM ANTIQUITY TO EARLY MODERN ERA

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RIA BERG, ANTONELLA CORALINI, ANU KAISA KOPONEN & REIMA VÄLIMÄKI



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Pompeii. After F. Niccolini – F. Niccolini, *Le case ed i monumenti di Pompei disegnatì e descritti*, Napoli
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***Sacra privata* in Central Italy. New Data from an Archaeological Research**

MADDALENA BASSANI¹

The theme of *sacra privata* has only recently been paid due attention by archaeologists, historians and religion scholars,² since domestic cult had previously been ‘compressed’ under the generic category of *lararia*, only identified in the paintings and statuettes in honour of the Lares attested especially in the Vesuvius area, and therefore described as the most tangible evidence of Roman families’ religiousness.

Actually, as I have often remarked in previous studies,³ the word *lararium* is totally improper to define the expressions of domestic cult before the third century CE, as until then this word was not attested in the Latin language, and mostly as there are many other indicators of private worship to be found by carefully studying the ancient house.

It is precisely those ‘markers’ that I intend to analyse here, in the hope of outlining in greater detail the several sides of *sacra privata*:⁴ this category includes the cult indicators of family guardian deities (the traditional pantheon gods and foreign divinities), those of ancestors (*divi parentes*), and finally, as we will see, some forms of worship of the imperial family members.⁵

The results presented here represent an overview of a wider recent research project dedicated to archaeological contexts in central Italy.⁶

The Investigated Area and the Type of Domestic Cult Indicators

The choice to analyse the archaeological documentation of present central Italy regions, in particular Marche, Abruzzo, Molise, Umbria, Tuscany, derives from the fact that this area has never been the subject of in-depth study on private worship: therefore it promised new elements, even if it was immediately clear that here, unlike other previously studied areas, like Campania, Lazio or the provinces, the recovery of data might be more complex, given the inhomogeneous conservation of archaeological traces in urban or extra-urban contexts. Furthermore, since the investigated regions do not exactly coincide with the Augustan *regiones*, we have deemed useful for our research purposes to include in the investigation some residential contexts

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² ORTALLI – NERI 2007; BASSANI 2008; GIACOBELLO 2008; LAFORGE 2009; BASSANI – GHEDINI 2011; VAN ANDRINGA 2009; *Les cultes domestiques* 2013; SEAMENI 2014. For an updated outline, see BASSANI 2017, with wide bibliography.

³ BASSANI 2008, in partic. 49–64; BASSANI 2017, in partic. 23–34.

⁴ For further notes about the need to consider multiple features in the study of the private worship, see in this book my first paper, ‘Gods and Cult Objects in Roman Houses’.

⁵ We cannot omit that alongside expressions of private cult, precise ritual actions have also been recorded, that is votive deposits of various nature: ample discussion in BASSANI 2017, chapter 9, in partic. 165–74.

⁶ The research project, carried out between 2014 and 2016, was funded through a fellowship with an additional research amount for a final publication (BASSANI 2017, edited by the Padova University Press, Padova).

between Bolsena and Tivoli, a sort of ‘corridor’ corresponding to the southern borders of ancient Etruria and the north-western ones of Samnium. This, in order to compare the documentation from the central regions to the more abundant one from the Lazio residences, where indicators of domestic cult could appear more ‘eloquent’.⁷

The research has included forty-seven dwellings: urban *domus*, countryside residences and extra-urban villas of medium or large dimensions, with attendance ranging from the second century BCE to the fourth century CE.⁸ There, indicators of private worship have emerged, which can be grouped into five categories: interior rooms and exterior buildings (*sacraria* and *sacella* respectively), marked in their functional purpose by the presence of altars, niches, *aediculae*, paintings, mobile artefacts and/or inscriptions; fixed worship furniture generally found inside the house (altars, niches, pedestals), which can sometimes be associated to *putealia* and wells, when worship or ritual actions are evident. Also, an all-but-secondary role is played by mobile artefacts like sculptures and reliefs, which we will come back to further below, but also *arulae*, *thymiateria* and in some cases domestic crockery; finally, we need to mention the inscriptions on altars or slabs, which in some cases have greatly contributed to the interpretation of the religious background of the family living in a given domestic context.

These indicators will now be exemplified within objects and images of domestic religion, to focus then on carved artefacts pertaining to private forms of imperial worship, which represents, as we believe, an unprecedented outlook on *sacra privata*.

Examples of *Sacraria* and *Sacella*

Let us start from some contexts containing interior spaces certainly dedicated to private ceremonies, on account of the presence of objects and images pertaining to the sacred sphere. In a Roman villa located in Madonna della Difesa, near Larino (Molise), which was excavated in the 1800s, a room was discovered which, in my opinion, represents a typical domestic *sacrarium* dating back to the first century BCE (**Fig. 1**):⁹ with a rectangular plan, a cross-reticulated mosaic floor and red-stripped walls, it featured a pyramid-shaped limestone altar, with a *bucranium* and a *patera* carved on the pedestal. Afterwards, in the Imperial age, the mosaic was refurbished, with the insertion of an unusual vase, positioned on the left: it appears to be inspired to wine containers of Dionysian nature, perhaps indicating the performance of ceremonies linked to Bacchus and wine production.

Whereas the Larino *sacrarium* cannot be enclosed within the villa’s layout, because there is no updated plan of the villa, the *sacrarium* of the Volusii Saturnini villa at Lucus Feroniae (Lazio) offers instead a more clarifying comparison (**Fig. 2**):¹⁰ found in the servants’ quarters of the villa in the 1960s, it appears as a typical space for domestic worship, for the presence of numerous function markers. In the middle there was an altar with priestly symbols, on one side a circular *trapeza* for the ritual offerings and a seat for the participants to the ceremonies: these three pieces of worship furniture were made of marble and likely

⁷ In fact, while these regions were, geographically speaking, marked to the north by the natural Apennine barrier, they were historically inhabited by ethnically different peoples that, from the third century BCE, shared a common Italic identity, which then turned into a solid Romanised community when Rome ruled the whole peninsula.

⁸ For a detailed analysis of these aspects we refer to the chapters in the book quoted at the beginning (BASSANI 2017, chapters 4–11, in partic. 53–198).

⁹ DE FELICE 1994, 157–59; BASSANI 2017, 54 and passim, 279. The space, as well as the altar, is dated from the mid-first century BCE.

¹⁰ BASSANI 2017, 55 and passim, in partic. 307–12.

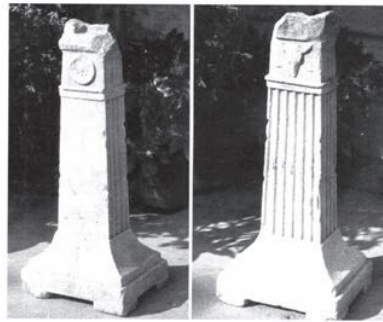
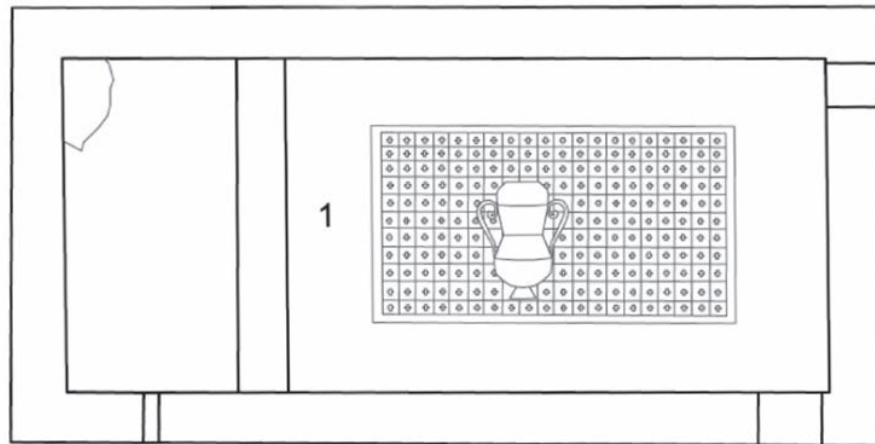


Fig. 1: Larino, villa at Madonna della Difesa (CB). Plan of the *sacrum* 1 and the altar (After BASSANI 2017, 279, figs. 21.1, 21.2).

of urban production, while the two side pedestals were of brickwork, set on the original floral-geometric mosaic in the second half of the first century CE. On them were two inscriptions celebrating the Volusii family, in particular some of its members who held very important public posts, and of whom fragments of sculptures and portraits were found; as we will remark later on, these *imagines maiorum* had also been associated to the sculptures of two *Augustae*, clearly to underline the family's role in the organs of power in the first century CE.

It seems important to stress the type of cult that must have been celebrated here: the lack of reference to the Lares, the emphasis on some family *maiores*, the positioning of the *sacrum* in the servants' quarters, allow us to suppose that the room was dedicated to the worshipping of ancestors and perhaps to imperial cult, even if we cannot exclude forms of worship towards traditional pantheon figures, which could be represented by statuettes no longer present at the time of discovery.

Regarding this type of interior structures, some interesting data are also offered by buildings situated in the houses' outdoor spaces, identified as *sacella*. At Cosa (Tuscany), Diana's house is attested, so called for the discovery, in the garden at the back of the *domus*, of a *sacellum* in honour of the goddess (**Fig. 3**).¹¹ Here, in the first half of the first century CE, a small temple was built on a *podium*, with three steps and columns to support the covering, where fragments of a less-than-life-size statue were found, composed of a head of Greek-origin and body of Julio-Claudian age; the goddess was flanked by a dog and must have been 'introduced' by an inscription which, we believe, was originally located on the front of the temple. The

¹¹ FENTRESS 2003; BASSANI 2017, 63 and passim, in partic. 295–97.

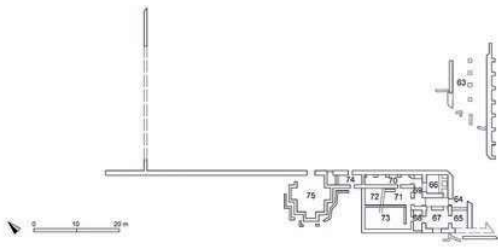
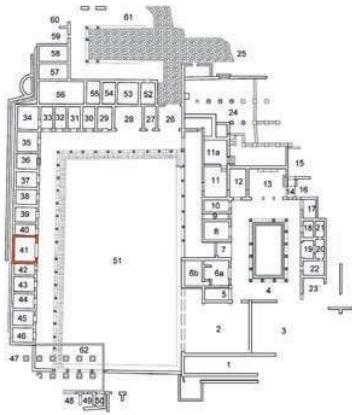


Fig. 2: Lucus Feroniae, villa of the Volusii Saturnini. The plan with the *sacrum* 41 and the furnishings for worship (After BASSANI 2017, 308–9, figs. 40.1, 40.4).

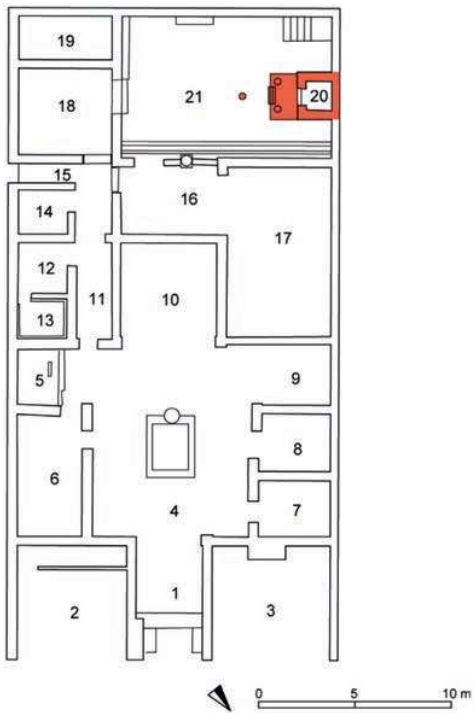


Fig. 3: Cosa, *domus* of Diana (GR). Plan with the *sacellum* 20 and the statue of Diana (After BASSANI 2017, 295–96, figs. 33.1, 33.2, 33.3).

latter, of modest dimensions like similar examples from Pompeii, was preceded by an altar carved from the tambour of a column, where two votive deposits were found, testifying to the celebratory and ceremonial function of this part of the *domus*.

A further and very interesting example of a probable *sacellum* comes from a villa in the Tivoli area, at Setteville (Vignacce, Lazio):¹² although there is no overall plan of the residence, portions of rooms and also decorative and worship statues have been repeatedly found, among which the one representing a child Hercules stands out. Found in a precise spot of the villa's original garden, where it was perhaps displayed within a *sacellum* like the Tuscan example, the less-than-life-size statue appears as a work of valuable make, attributable to workshops from the middle-Imperial age. The fact that it could have been a cult statue seems to be confirmed by the discovery of an important inscription fragment, re-used as a threshold piece in one of the late refurbishments of the villa (Fig. 4):¹³ it states that Hercules was the custodian of the family, defined as *domus* in its sense of domestic unit, and the god was perceived as *sospitalis*, therefore as a real protector of the owners, the Galloni, whose procurator, a Sabinus, had dedicated the epigraph following the release from a vow.



Fig. 4: Setteville, villa at Vignacce. The statue of child Hercules and the inscription attesting the private worship for him as the *custos* of the *domus* Galloniana (After BASSANI 2017, 318–19, figs. 43.4, 33.2, 43.6).

Imperial Statues and Portraits from Domestic Contexts

The data so far presented, despite the few examples quoted, clarify the multiplicity of elements to be taken into consideration in the study of *sacra privata* of the ancient house, especially the Roman one: architectural-structural data, fixed worship and decorative setups, epigraphic documents, but also more

¹² ADEMBRI et al. 2002. BASSANI 2017, 97 and passim, in partic. 317–20.

¹³ For and interpretative reading of the inscription, see the substantial contribution of M.G. Granino Cecere in ADEMBRI et al. 2002.

strictly cult elements relating to the venerated subjects within the dwellings, mostly expressed through sculpture – traditional deities or ancestors’ *imagines*. But alongside these divine entities, we also need to focus on a class of materials found in some surveyed houses in central Italy, that appear particularly interesting from an interpretative point of view: these are statues and portraits of emperors and *Augustae* which could be tangible proof of forms of imperial cult carried out at a ‘private’ level.¹⁴ In fact, among the forty-seven catalogued houses, five have preserved fragments of statues and portraits of the imperial house: certainly a small number, which could however indicate a wider phenomenon, as we will have occasion to underline thanks to adequate literary comparisons and references.

Let us start from the archaeological data. The houses at issue are scattered among Marche (*domus* under the Law Courts in Ascoli Piceno, *domus* of the Coiedii at Suasa), Abruzzo (villa at Pescara), Tuscany (villa at Massaciuccoli) and northern Lazio (villa of the Volusii Saturnini, Lucus Feroniae) and all appear of a mid-high standard.¹⁵ To these five contexts the case of a *domus* can be added, in Spoleto in Via Visiale, in Umbria, where a base of a probable statue was found, bearing a partly abraded inscription, perhaps dedicated to Caligula.¹⁶

Let us first consider the attestations relating to images of Augustus. In the villa at Pescara recent excavations have brought up the fragment of a head very probably depicting the founder of the empire: made of basalt (greywacke) and of small dimensions, only the upper part of the head survives, presenting the typical three-pronged claw hairstyle (**Fig. 5**). It must have been made by artists of Egyptian origin, as

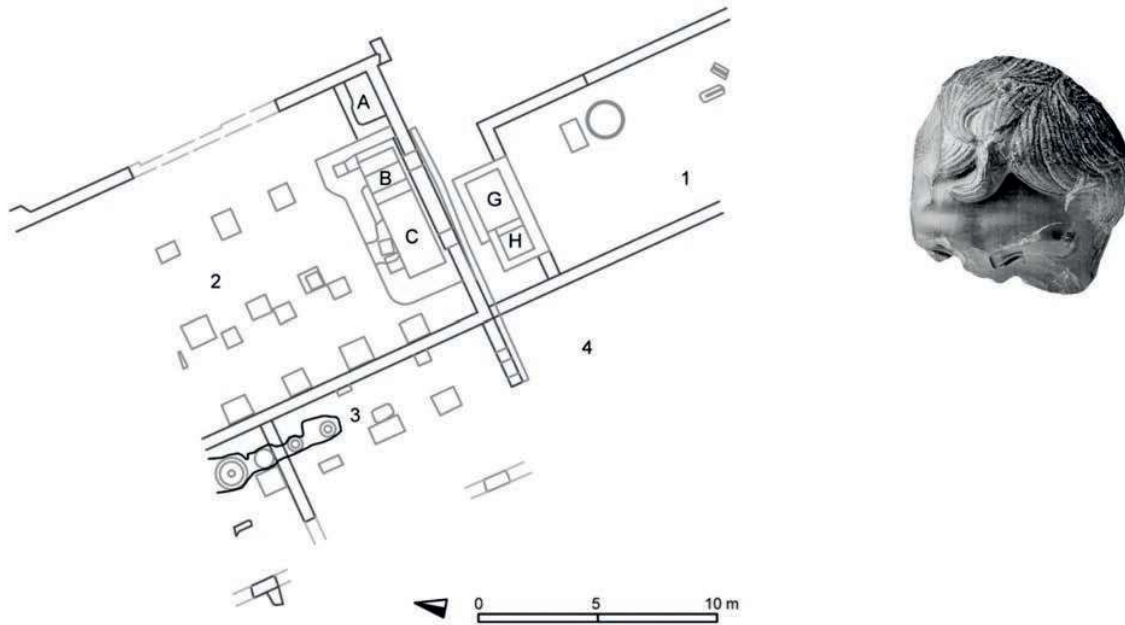


Fig. 5: Pescara, villa at Fonte del Sedime (AQ). The plan and the head of Augustus found here (After BASSANI 2017, 270, figs. 13.1, 13.3).

¹⁴ Ample discussion in BASSANI 2017, 120–37 and 232–40; see also the recent contributions of I. Gradel and J. Scheid on the topic (GRADEL 2002; SCHEID 2006–2007).

¹⁵ *Domus* under the Law Courts, Ascoli Piceno: BASSANI 2017, 251–52, with previous bibliography; *domus* of the Coiedii, Suasa: BASSANI 2017, 259–61, with previous bibliography; villa at Pescara, loc. Fonte del Sedime: BASSANI 2017, 270–71, with previous bibliography; villa at Massaciuccoli, Lucca: BASSANI 2017, 297–99, with previous bibliography; villa of the Volusii Saturnini, Lucus Feroniae: BASSANI 2017, 307–12, with previous bibliography.

¹⁶ BASSANI 2017, 286–88, with previous bibliography.

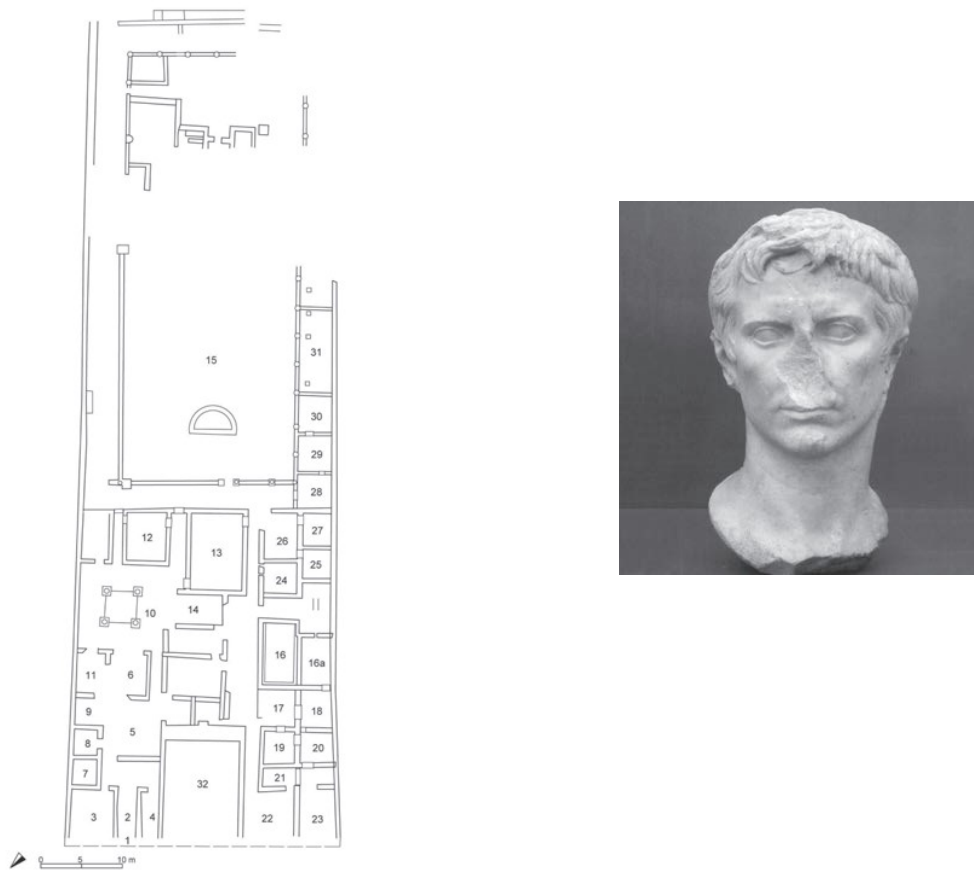


Fig. 6: Suasa, *domus* of the Coiedii (AN). The plan and the head of Augustus found here (After BASSANI 2017, 260, figs. 6.2, 6.4).

this material only appeared on the Roman market following the conquest of Egypt by Octavianus, nor does it seem to be used beyond the first century CE, when porphyry prevailed for official portraits of rulers. The discovery of such find in an Abruzzo villa therefore is strong proof not only of the cult value of such images, which are usually found in public buildings and especially in the *Augustea*, but also of the indirect adhesion, on the part of the owners of the villa, to the *principes'* and the imperial house's political propaganda.

The recovery of some fragments of a marble statue of Augustus in a *domus* attributed to the Coiedii family appears more problematic. Among the greatest landowners in Suasa (Marche), one of the main members, L. Coiedius Candidus, had been dedicated a commemorative monument in the house, as the fragment of an inscription shows (**Fig. 6**). The layout of the house dates back to the early second century CE, but it was set on a previous *domus* of the late Republican-Augustan age, also covering other existing residential contexts; in the third century CE, moreover, the house was reduced, which led to the creation of a room 32 with street access. The interesting and problematic fact is that the fragments of Augustus' statue were found inside the small space 21, which surely cannot be interpreted as a private shrine, given the absolute lack of precise cult indicators: according to the explorers, the statue was deposited there at a late stage, when the house was almost abandoned, whereas its original position is unknown. According to some hypotheses, it may have decorated room 32, which is therefore to be interpreted as a publicly-accessed room for imperial cult, but we cannot exclude that the Augustus' statue had already been in the house previously: it may have been displayed next to the honorary monument to L. Coiedius Candidus dated, like the statue, to the Claudian age. If this hypothesis were true, we could be facing a sort of gallery of commemorative

images devised to associate the Coiedii forefather to the founder of the empire, a game of allusions and self-celebrating reference by one of the most important families of the city.

It would be a situation not unlike the one in the Massaciuccoli villa, in Tuscany (**Fig. 7**). Here as well, part of a statue – now lost – was found in the 1700s, of a figure identified as an emperor: this time Claudius has been proposed, on the basis of a drawing made at the time of discovery; in the same context, another statue was also found, of a male person, perhaps a member of the Venuleii, the rich patrons active under Nero and Vespasian, who ruled the north-western part of Tuscany. According to the explorers, the owners of the villa also possessed a *mansio* excavated near the villa, where a portrait was recovered, perhaps of Poppaea, but we cannot exclude that the image of the Augusta was part of a statuary within the villa, among which Claudius' statue may have been one of the most important *eikones*.

To Trajan, instead, was dedicated a marble head found in room 5 of a *domus* in Ascoli Piceno (Marche) (**Fig. 8**): despite the complex interpretation of the data pertaining to this and other *domus* discovered nearby, the room may have been part of the house extending under the Law Courts and may have represented a space dedicated to the ceremonial functions of the resident family, as a recovered Nike's bronze wing, together with the emperor's head, would suggest. These materials should have constituted part of objects dedicated to the private worship carried out in the *domus*.

The cases mentioned so far could be regarded as being of scarce documentary merit and dismissed as a series of common traces of homage paid to the rulers, rather than attestations of imperial cult, were it not for the fact that all the examples can find a precise counterpart in the above-mentioned *sacrarium* in the Volusii Saturnini villa at Lucus Feroniae (Lazio). Here shrine 41 housed both some ancestors' images and a statue of Agrippina the Younger, preserved in fragments (**Fig. 9**); furthermore, in the close surroundings of the shrine a portrait of Sabina, Hadrian's wife, was found, which was very probably preserved inside room 41. The presence of the multiple above-mentioned cult indicators confirms the function of this space as a room devoted to the worship ceremonies of the dwellers and at the same time strengthens the hypothesis

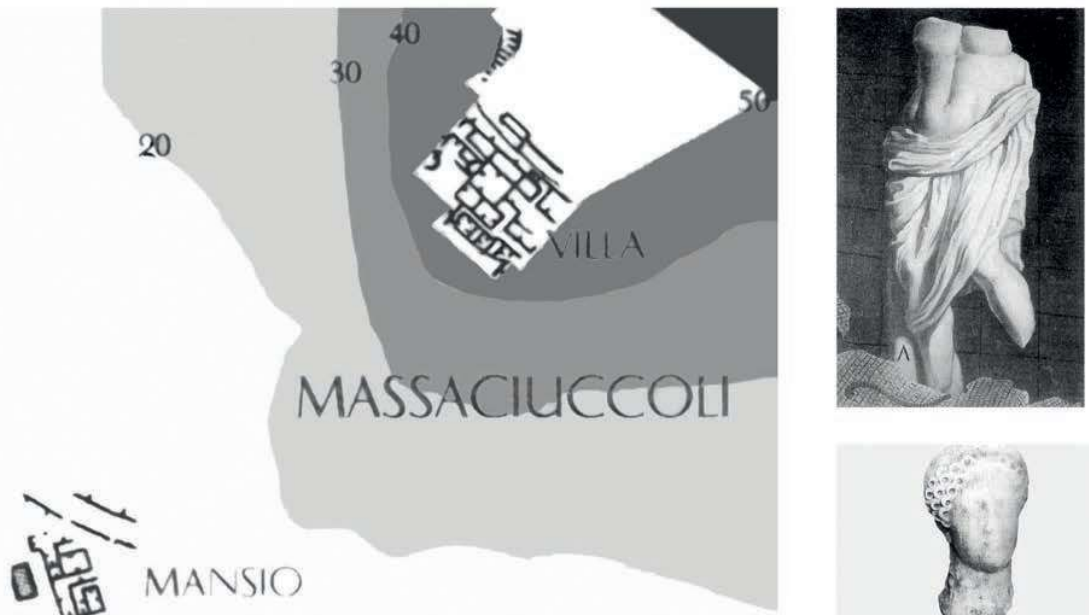


Fig. 7: Massaciuccoli, villa of the Venuleii (LU). The plan of the residential building and the *mansio*, with the male statue (Claudius?) in a drawing of 1756 and the portrait of an Augusta (Poppaea?) (After BASSANI 2017, 298, figs. 34.1, 34.3, 34.4).

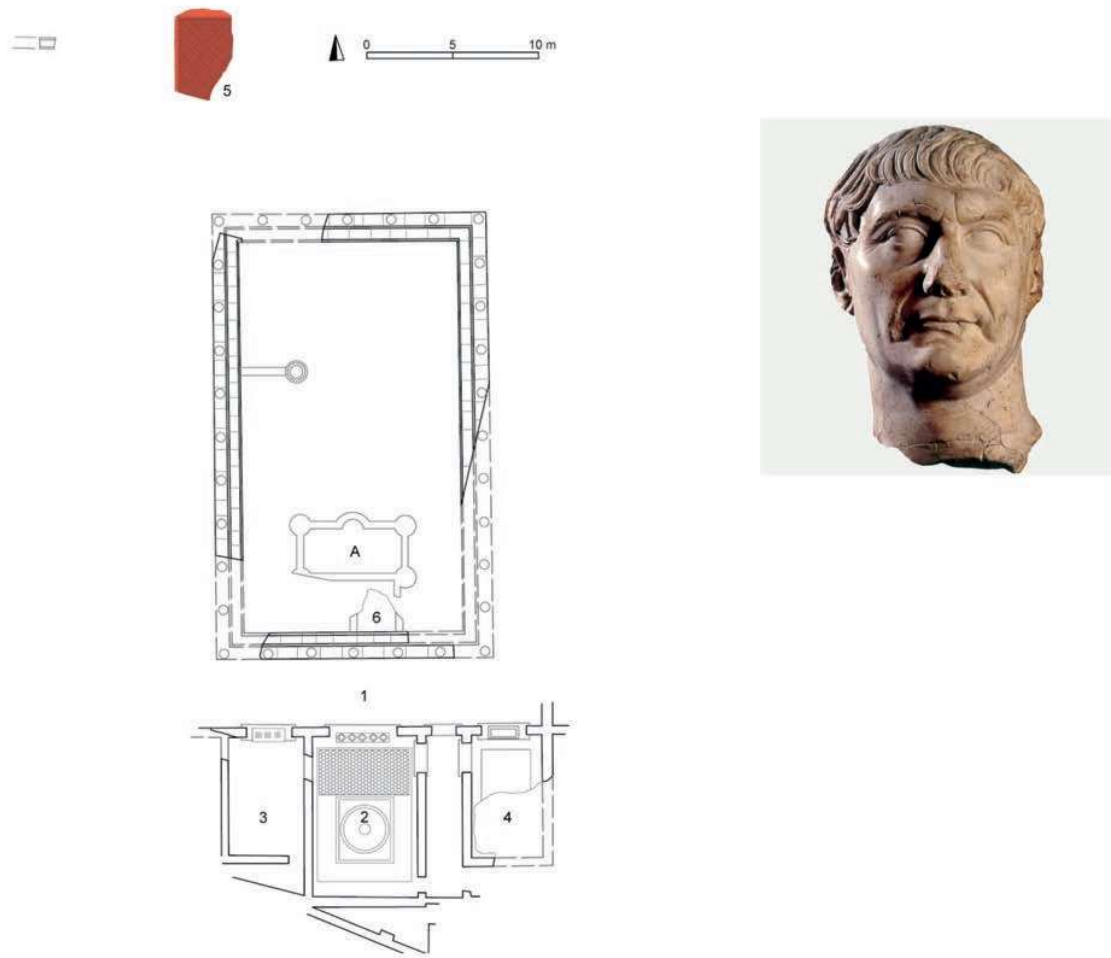


Fig. 8: Ascoli Piceno, *domus* under the Law Courts. The plan with the position of the *sacrarium* 5 and the head of Trajan found here (After BASSANI 2017, 2951, figs. 1.1, 1.2).

that in Roman houses, especially those of high rank, not only gods and ancestors, but also images of *Augusti* and *Augustae* could be found among the venerated deities. Outside the specific sphere under investigation, indeed, there are further confirmations:¹⁷ busts and portraits of Marcellus, Agrippa, Drusus Iulius Caesar were found in some dwellings in Pompeii (Casa del Citarista, I 4, 5.25; Casa di Diomede, I 2, 17; Casa di Dedalo e Icaro, IX 6, 3: **Fig. 10**), as well as a precious bust of Marcellus recovered in a house in Taranto; again, an image of Tiberius Gemellus came from the *domus* of Frescoes in Luni, precisely from the *sacellum* area in the house garden. Further examples can be given from some residences in the eastern Mediterranean: the cult statuettes from the House of Bronzes in Kos, among which a Caracalla (or Geta) bust stands out; or the Caligula bust from a residential building still in Kos. These cases are images of sovereigns placed among the cult statuettes of the families owning the residences, because they were considered to be protectors of the family unit on equal terms with the deities presiding over the *domus*.

Therefore, the materials found in the houses in central Italy under survey can be compared to similar artefacts found in other domestic contexts throughout the empire; among them, indeed, some clearly testify

¹⁷ For the busts and portraits mentioned in the paragraph, see BASSANI 2017, 124–30 with specific bibliography.



Fig. 9: Lucus Feroniae, villa of the Volusii Saturnini. The plan with the *sacrarium* 41 and some of the statues and portraits found inside related to the imperial cult (After BASSANI 2017, 311, figs. 40.9, 40.10).

to the potentially ‘sacred’ value attributed to the images of sovereigns within the dwellings. On the other hand, if we read some literary documents from the Imperial age in this perspective, we can find confirmation of the practice of owning statues and portraits of *Augusti* and *Augustae* in private houses, to enable in them forms of worship similar to the well-known and widely studied ones of the public sphere.

Ovid, for example, from his exile in the Pontus, thanks his friend Cotta for sending him images of Augustus, Tiberius, Livia, Germanicus and Drusus to place in the domestic shrine.¹⁸ The poet does not clarify in which part of his home these were, but we can image an internal place dedicated to the worship activities: a specific *sacrarium*, or an *aedicula* in the atrium, or a private room, a *cubiculum*, used also for religious celebrations. In this sense, some decades later, Suetonius remembers having given Hadrian a statuette of Octavian which was placed in the *cubiculum* appointed to the veneration of the Lares and other deities.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ov. Pont. 2.8.1: *Redditus est nobis Caesar cum Caesare nuper, / quos mihi misisti, Maxime Cotta, deos; / utque tuum munus numerum, quem debet, haberet, / est ibi Caesaribus Livia iuncta suis. / Argentum felix omnique beatius auro, / quod, fuerit pretium cum rude, numen habet.* Ov. Pont. 4.9.105: *Nec pietas ignota mea est: videt hospita terra / in nostra sacrum Caesaris esse domo. / Stant pariter natusque pius coniunxque sacerdos, / numina iam facto non leviora deo. / Neu desit pars ulla domus, stat uterque nepotum, / hic aviae lateri proximus, ille patris.*

¹⁹ Suet. Aug. 7: *Thurinum cognominatum satis certa probatione tradiderim nactus puerilem imagunculam eius aeream veterem ferreis et paene iam exolescentibus litteris hoc nomine inscriptam, quae dono a me principi data inter cubiculi Lares colitus.*



Fig. 10: Pompei, *domus* of Dio-medea, I 2, 17. View of the portrait of Agrippa from the peristyle (After BASSANI 2017, 125, fig. 92).

Tacitus, on his part, bears witness to the famous case of Granius Marcellus, accused of lese majesty for substituting the head of Augustus on a statue with that of Tiberius as soon as the *princeps* died:²⁰ but clearly that action could only have been performed within the walls of Granius Marcellus' residence, as it would have been impossible in a public space without arousing general indignation. Finally, in the *Historia Augusta* it is attested that during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, because of his great government, all the people had an image of the Emperor at home: if not, someone could be accused of *sacrilegium*.²¹

We could continue with further examples, but here it is enough to conclude recalling attention on the need to approach the study of *sacra privata* with a new methodology, capable of stepping outside the well-known sphere of the so-called *lararia* to investigate the phenomenon of domestic cult starting from the study of all indicators traced in a residential space. It is enough, we hope, to have outlined, if only in general terms, the wide scope of a phenomenon like that of imperial cult in the private sphere, which has so far been ignored because considered a practice of exclusive, and almost obvious, public competence: and this because there has not been, until now, a perspective of investigation able to examine *sacra privata* in all their different facets, beyond the images of the Lares. With these premises, the future developments appear wider and more articulated than imagined, and the continuation of research cannot but widen discussion and bring out new significant data to be analysed.

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²⁰ Tac. ann. 1.74: *Addidit Hispo statuam Marcelli altius quam Caesarum sitam, et alia in statua amputato capite Augusti effigiem Tiberii inditam.*

²¹ *Hist. Aug. Aur.* 18: *Et parum sane fuit quod illi honores divinos omnis aetas omnis sexus omnis condicio ac dignitas dedit, nisi quod etiam sacrilegus iudicatus est qui eius imaginem in sua domo non habuit, qui per fortunam vel potuit habere vel debuit. Denique hodieque in multis domibus Marci Antonini statuae consistunt inter deos penates.*