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Ceiling *Decor* Contextualised: A Case Study from the ‘Casa di Augusto’ on the Palatine

Abstract: The ‘Casa di Augusto’ was intentionally filled in after 36 B.C. for the construction of a temple dedicated to Apollo Palatinus. Because of this, much of the room decoration has survived. Besides the (plundered) *opus sectile* floors and the wall paintings, the ceiling decorations from multiple rooms have been preserved. During past decades, some of these have been painstakingly reconstructed from thousands of fragments. Thanks to this work we are able to examine an unparalleled ceiling ensemble from a lavish Late Republican house in ancient Rome. The case study of the ‘Casa di Augusto’ allows us to answer some important questions about the role that Second Style ceilings played in domestic architecture. How were they used to hierarchise rooms together with wall paintings and floor decoration? Which strategies were used to suggest different levels of depth? How were different lighting methods used to stage the rooms? And, finally, how did they evoke specific atmospheres or moods?

Introduction¹

Of all ancient architectural decoration, we know the least about ceilings. While floors and wall paintings are frequently preserved, the ceilings of temples, porticos and private buildings are usually lost. The absence of ceilings prevents us from having a complete image of ancient architecture, which is regrettable, particularly when it comes to the grand architecture of the Hellenistic period². This deficiency is especially poignant in the context of the many contemporary studies on ancient space and its interconnected relationship with people³. The goal of this paper is therefore to analyse the ceiling decorations from the ‘Casa di Augusto’, a building complex located on the west side of the Palatine Hill on the slope facing towards the Circus Maximus⁴. For years, scholars have been involved in a heated discussion as to who the owner of this building was and when it was erected⁵. In any event, it is clear that the house belonged to an extremely affluent and influential member of the highest elite. Soon after 36 B.C. the property was levelled and filled in for the construction of the Temple of Apollo Palatinus and so the whole complex is exceptionally well preserved. For once, multiple ceilings can be studied within the context of a complete ensemble of rooms decorated in the Second Style. This extraordinary complex highlights the immense importance of ceiling decoration in Late Republican and Early Imperial Italy.

In our context, the western peristyle and its surrounding rooms are of particular interest⁶. The full extent of the building is unknown, as its location on the slope meant that large parts of its

¹ For help with the translation, I have to thank Taylor Lauritsen (to whom I also owe numerous references regarding content) and Elise Tacconi-Garman.

² Lauter 1986, 252.

³ Studies conducted in Germany include Muth 1998; Lorenz 2008; Haug 2014.

⁴ For a summary of the excavations, see Cassetta – Sisani 2006, 72–74; Borrello 2009; Tomei 2014.

⁵ This is not the place to enter into the lively debate surrounding the work of Iacopi – Tedone 2005/2006 on the identification of the complex (for the most recent summary of the discussion of the identification of the owner and the dating of the house, cf. Lipps 2018, 74–89 with bibliography). At the request of the editors, the building, whose owner is not known with certainty before 36 B.C., is referred to as the ‘Casa di Augusto’ in the following.

⁶ Tomei 2014, 41–192.

Fig. 1: Plan of the western peristyle in the 'Casa di Augusto'.

southern and western rooms fell victim to landslides (Fig. 1). The well-preserved north-facing side includes multiple mirror-image rooms grouped along either side of a central *oecus* (Fig. 1, 3–9). A so-called 'Dreiraumgruppe' made up of a ramp, a tetrastyle *oecus* and two *cubicula*, on top of one another, can be found on the east side of the peristyle (Fig. 1, 16–20).

The first part of this paper focuses on the architecture of the tetrastyle *oecus*, with an emphasis on its ceiling decoration (Fig. 1, 19). This will make the aesthetic and representational qualities of stuccoed ceilings obvious. Second, the ceilings from the neighbouring 'studiolo' (Fig. 1, 20, upper floor), the ramp (Fig. 1, 16) and small blocks of stucco from the ceilings of rooms on the north side of the peristyle (Fig. 1, 3–9) will be added to the equation, in an effort to outline the space-differentiating and hierarchising effects of ceilings in a broader residential context. Finally, based on earlier examples and ancient texts, the significance of ceiling decoration for the presentation and perception of antique architecture is outlined. On this basis, I will model the staging of the *oecus tetrastylus* and its ceiling in the context of an evening event.

The tetrastyle *oecus*

Thanks to the research of the past few decades, the tetrastyle *oecus* in the 'Casa di Augusto', which consists of a central nave and two side aisles, is today one of the few ancient rooms outside Pompeii and Herculaneum that has been almost completely reconstructed (Fig. 2). This allows us to understand the sophisticated strategies by which different areas of the room were separated from one another by means of decoration and design⁷. In particular, one can see how the wall painting, floor and ceiling design were coordinated in detail.

The wall paintings are mirror images of each other. On either side of the room, a bottom border runs along the entire length of the wall. In the vestibule, brown podia decorated with green mouldings rise to a height of 1 m above the floor; these are topped by a field of red orthostates and an intricate

⁷ Cf. Clarke 1991, 399.

Fig. 2: Hypothetical visualisation of the *oecus tetrastylus*.

crowning entablature. Above is a frieze zone, adorned with rinceaux painted on a black background and green aedicular elements with coffered ceilings inspired by theatrical architecture. The vestibule is separated from the actual *oecus* by painted pilasters, which correspond to the load-bearing pillars that support the ceiling. Beyond the painted pilasters, inside the room, an offset podium seems to emerge from each wall. Above, aedicules with Corinthian columns and broken pediments stand in front of a spacious red background. Between the columns, masks and other sacral motifs appear⁸.

The pattern of the floor decoration can be deduced from the negative imprints left behind by the robbed *sectile* tiles. Remains of the floor itself and finds throughout the rest of the ‘Casa di Augusto’ suggest that the area below the vaulted ceiling was originally decorated with pavonazzetto and giallo antico. Other parts of the floor, however, seem to have been covered with slate⁹. The nave of the *oecus* was further separated from the vestibule and the aisles by the use of different tile patterns. We can see, therefore, that the wall paintings and floor decoration were used to separate the vestibule and the *oecus* from one another, while also differentiating areas within the *oecus* itself through the composition, virtuosity and sheer number of individual decorative elements.

The decoration on the suspended ceiling also varied depending upon its position within the room¹⁰. The central vault was adorned with double-recessed coffers containing intricate central motifs. In contrast, the flat parts of the ceiling built over the aisles were decorated only with single-recessed coffers. The staging of the area below the barrel-vault is particularly striking, partially because of the great attention to detail in the stucco decoration. At first the strategies used to distinguish the different zones seem similar to those employed in the floor decoration and wall painting, at least in terms of the differing densities and broad spectrum of decorative elements and compositions. The cornice in the side aisles connects the walls to the ceiling and is trimmed only with dentils, stirrup-framed leaves and darts (Fig. 3). The stucco decorations of the central nave stand in clear contrast, as numerous decorative elements are brought together in considerably more

⁸ Carettoni 1983, 52–60.

⁹ Gallochio et al. 2017, 462f.

¹⁰ For the reconstruction, see Lipps 2018, 15–74.

Fig. 3: Ionic *geison* from the nave of the *oecus tetrastylus*.

Fig. 4: Doric *geison* from the *oecus tetrastylus*.

Fig. 5: Fragment of a stuccoed diamond coffer from the *oecus tetrastylus*.

virtuosic compositions. For example, on the lowest part of the vault, a more intricately designed entablature was used, consisting of a Doric frieze and *geison*, as well other unique types of *geisa* (Fig. 4). The greater attention to detail becomes especially clear when comparing the coffers, which are double-recessed, in addition to the egg-and-dart *cyma* framed by stirrup-framed leaves and darts. Here, most of the strips are decorated with ornamental bands, such as ‘running dog’ or s-loop motifs (Fig. 5). Besides the sheer mass of ornamental elements, the broad range of decoration used and the addition of figurative ornaments (including depictions of griffins) enhance the central nave. Thus, the decoration of the walls, floor and ceiling worked together to subdivide the interior space of the room. At the same time, however, the varying colours and materials employed positioned these elements in contrast to one another.

Aesthetic and representational qualities of the stuccoed ceiling

A major distinction between paintings, mosaics and stuccoed ceilings is the differing approach to the utilisation of light. While paintings and mosaics are only capable of imitating shadows, stucco can create real light and shadow through variations of depth. These effects are heightened in the central nave compared to the side aisles, due to the double-recessed coffers, and further enhanced through the use of circle motifs with additional consoles framed by a band of interlace (Fig. 6). An attempt to imitate these effects can be observed in the *nymphaeum* mosaic on the Via degli Annibaldi (Fig. 7)¹¹.

Fig. 6: Hypothetical reconstruction sketch of the circle motif with narrow plaited band from the *oecus tetrastylus*.

Fig. 7: Wall mosaic from the *nymphaeum* on the Via degli Annibaldi, Rome.

¹¹ On the mosaic in the *nymphaeum* from the Via degli Annibaldi, cf. Sear 1977, 54–56 Pl. 7, 1. On the importance of light, especially in the Second Style, cf. Ascherl 2002, particularly 8–20 with literary sources.

Fig. 8: Ceiling paintings from the front (left) and back (right) parts of the ramp.

UV-VIS absorption spectroscopy conducted on the stucco by Heinrich Piening confirms that the use of depth was especially important. Contrary to the common assumption that stuccoed ceilings were left unpainted in Republican Italy¹², analysis of the fragments from the tetrastyle *oecus* has shown that they were painted white and covered at least partially in a gloss coating, which added to the sheen of the ceiling and therefore most likely also enhanced the spatial effect¹³. Additionally, this must have influenced the lighting of the room, keeping in mind that the walls were mostly painted in quite dark colours. The analysis shows a clear desire to enhance and emphasise the ceiling's depth through the use of paints and glossy finishes, a conclusion that fits well with the goals of the Second Style, which sought to create a sense of height and space¹⁴.

The interplay of ceilings in a broader context

However, the *oecus tetrastylus* is not the only space in the 'Casa di Augusto' that permits the reconstruction of decorative ensembles of the Late Second Style. Indeed, a whole suite of Late Republican rooms that document the interplay of ceilings with one another has been preserved around the western peristyle.

The ramp passing to the south of the *oecus* (Fig. 1, 16) consists of a slightly wider entrance area, which leads to a comparatively narrow hallway. In the entrance area, the ceiling is decorated with a pattern of painted coffers and diamonds (Fig. 8, left). The two-dimensional coffers are designed to look as if they are double-recessed, and employ imitative shadow-effects that trick the viewer into thinking that the source of light comes more or less from the entrance. The decorations toward the back of the room are clearly more subdued (Fig. 8, right). Here one encounters only simple painted coffers, and the broad, bright colour palette is reduced to a limited collection of dimmer tones. But even in this area, the painting achieves the impression that the light source is coming

¹² Ling 1991, 42; Rozenberg 2004, 107.

¹³ Piening 2018.

¹⁴ Tybout 1989.

Fig. 9: Reconstructed stuccoed ceiling from the 'studiolo'.

from the entrance, casting shadows across the ceiling¹⁵. The vaulted ceiling in the 'studiolo' (Fig. 1, 20 upstairs), however, is characterised by alternating painted and stuccoed areas (Fig. 9). The long sides at the beginning of the vault are decorated with friezes of rinceau and depictions of victories. Between these, a centre-oriented composition is displayed¹⁶.

When comparing the ramp, tetrastyle *oecus* and 'studiolo', it becomes clear that the three ceilings differ greatly from one another (Figs. 2–6; 8–9). The ceiling in the ramp was painted, while its counterpart in the tetrastyle *oecus* was covered in white stucco; the ceiling in the 'studiolo' represents a combination of the two techniques. Nevertheless, contrary to previous opinions, the decoration of these rooms must have been designed and executed around the same time¹⁷. Verana Bigalke, who studied the characteristics and styles of painting in the house, was able to prove that the same craftsmen worked on multiple rooms¹⁸. Additionally, by analysing the stucco, Gianna Musatti and Laura Thiemann showed that the ceilings in the 'studiolo' and the *oecus* were decorated at the same time, as the composition of the material is identical¹⁹. In the same way that the central nave and side aisles of the *oecus tetrastylus* were meant to add a certain hierarchy to the different areas, the ceilings of the three rooms were designed in different ways, but at the same time²⁰. They were used mainly to evoke different moods. The ceiling in the 'studiolo' is characterised by a weightless and intricate structure, which Vitruvius describes as especially valued by his contemporaries²¹. The individual elements can only be connected associatively. In addition, some of the stucco panels here were even gold plated, which, archaeologically speaking, is extremely rare in the context of

¹⁵ Carettoni 1983, 50 f. Fig. 6. 7 Y3. Z; Iacopi 2007, 57–60.

¹⁶ For the ramp and the 'studiolo,' see Musatti 2009, 41–52. 57–61. 63–68. 70–74; Tomei 2014, 131–151. 174–192.

¹⁷ Carettoni 1983, 90–92; Bruno 2008, 162. Falzone (2011, 197) describes the decoration from the 'studiolo' as having been executed later. Ehrhardt 1988, 647 f. argues against this hypothesis.

¹⁸ Bigalke 1990, esp. 245–247.

¹⁹ Musatti 2009, 27. 44–46; Thiemann 2018, 64 n. 119.

²⁰ The interplay between these different ceiling designs within the same architectural context highlights the limitations of attempts to date late Roman Republican stucco ceilings solely on the basis of form. The appearance, complexity or variation of formal elements within stucco ceilings appears not only to reflect chronological developments, but also depends substantially on the respective functional, social and environmental context of these ceilings.

²¹ Vit. De arch. 7, 5; cf. La Rocca 2008.

Fig. 10: Reconstructed ceiling block from room (3).

private houses²². The dominance of geometric designs and patterns on the ceiling in the tetrastyle *oecus*, which was completely covered in stucco, may have provoked states such as tranquillity, order, severity or solemnity²³. The ceiling of the ramp remains comparatively less elaborate in terms of the material and geometric design. It is only painted with a simple diamond pattern.

The rooms on the north side of the peristyle are also grouped around a central *oecus*²⁴. Many of the rooms likely incorporated vaulted ceilings, of which multiple sections clad in stucco have been discovered (Figs. 1; 3–9). The large central *oecus* (Figs. 1; 3) had a suspended ceiling in a manner similar to the *oecus tetrastylus*. The excavators have restored one of the blocks that probably belonged to this ceiling and incorporated it into their *anastylosis* (Fig. 10)²⁵. Sadly, today this *anastylosis* makes it quite difficult to examine the fragment, as little of the original surface has survived and the original curvature can no longer be determined. But it seems that the excavators correctly identified the decorative pattern based on the small patches of the surface that had been preserved. According to their work, the ceiling was decorated with a pattern consisting of square coffers surrounded by diamonds and circles, which combined to form a symmetrical composition. All elements seem to have been double-recessed.

Another fragment can clearly be placed in the wall between *cubiculum* (6) and the narrow corridor that runs to the west of it (Fig. 11). This reconstruction is certainly correct, as the remains of the bottom sides of two curving vaults, a wall mount and a flat surface are attached to the fragment. This evidence shows that the ceiling over the anterior part of the room was decorated with square coffers, while the posterior area was covered in a hexagonal pattern; the coffers and hexagons were single-recessed and framed by an egg-and-dart *cyma*. The centres of the coffers were decorated with specially inlaid applications, perhaps made of metal, as attested by dowel holes in the middle of both the squares and hexagons²⁶. However, the bottom side of the vault, which points towards the western corridor, displays a smooth, plastered surface.

²² Carettoni 1983, 81–85.

²³ Cf. Gombrich 1982; Haug 2014. On the ceilings, cf. Lipps 2018, 176. Ursula Mandel (2010) also recognised the colour white as being a key ingredient in evoking tranquillity.

²⁴ Tomei 2014, 59–130. See also Lipps 2018, 154–167, with further images.

²⁵ Borrello 2009, 12 and nos. 45 f.

²⁶ Metal fragments found at Olympia may have been bronze ceiling decorations. Adolf Furtwängler published them in 1890 and hypothesised that they once adorned the ceilings in the temple's *cellae* (Furtwängler 1890, 193 no. 1232–1239 Pl. 66). A Hellenistic example for the application of bronze embellishments in coffers was found in the *cella* of the Hieron on Samothrake (Lehmann 1969, 142–144 Figs. 93–94).

Fig. 11: Block 1 from room (6).

Fig. 12: Block 2 from room (4).

Two other blocks are well preserved enough to determine the diameters of their original context, and can therefore (on the basis of where they were discovered) be attributed to room (4). Both fragments are also adorned with decoration of identical size, indicating that the same moulds were employed in their production (Figs. 12–13). These fragments suggest that the vaulted ceiling in room (4) was decorated in a manner similar to that in the central *oecus* (3), consisting of strips with a middle ridge framing double-recessed coffers, diamonds and circle motifs. Some fragments also display elongated fields containing weapons. These recessed ornaments are bordered by stirrup framed leaf-and-dart and egg-and-dart *cymae*. The coffers, circle and diamond motifs are bedecked with various kinds of flowers. The decorations on the vault fragment from room (4) are almost a mirror image of those from the eastern room (5) (Figs. 14–15). The only variation is that different moulds were used for the detailing. Three blocks attest to this, but in contrast to the fragments discussed previously, they are not attached to a piece of *opus caementicium*, but instead cling to curved blocks of tuff. This proves that the ceiling in this room was constructed partially, or even completely, of walled vaults. Two fragments show the start of a frieze depicting weapons, and another displays a square coffer with a six-leaf blossom. The latter decorative element is again double-recessed, and each level is bordered by a stirrup framed leaf-and-dart and an egg-and-dart *cyma*.

If we add the fragmentarily preserved ceiling remains from the rooms to the north of the peristyle into the equation, we can complete the previous observations on the pointed hierarchisation and variation of the ceilings in the neighbouring rooms. The most lavishly decorated ceiling was probably located in the central *oecus* (3). It was possibly of the same calibre as the ceiling from the tetrastyle *oecus*. As far as we know, this room was the only one with a suspended ceiling, apart from

Fig. 13: Block 3 from room (4).

Fig. 14: Blocks 4 and 5 from room (5).

the tetrastyle *oecus*. According to Enrico Gallochio, Stefano Musco and Patrizio Pensabene, this room and the tetrastyle *oecus* were also the only ones in which colourful marble was used for the floors²⁷. Considerably less effort was put into the ceilings in the connecting corridors, such as those adjacent to *cubiculum* (6) or those linked to the ramp. These were merely painted with patterns of varying intricacy. Other rooms, such as *cubiculum* (6) or the ‘studiolo’, take a middle position in terms of the variation of depths. The ceiling of *cubiculum* (6) separated the room into a front and a back area by means of a hexagonal pattern and square coffers. Although the stucco motifs were only single-recessed, additional ornaments were added, maybe in a different material, likely metal, and in the ‘studiolo’ the only evidence for gilded stucco in the entire complex was found. Finally, rooms (4) and (5) are characterised by higher decorative variability and double-recessed coffers.

Ceiling decoration was therefore used to achieve decorative variability and to create exclusive, sometimes surprising types of rooms, each with its own atmosphere. In other examples, the *decor* simply followed spatial guidelines. So along with the floors and walls, the ceiling played a decisive role in the creation of these room-specific moods, which today can rarely be reconstructed²⁸.

²⁷ Gallochio et. al. 2017, 463.

²⁸ Similar observations have been made for floors and wall painting over the last few decades, e. g., Wallace-Hadrill 1988; Strocka 1991; Tybout 1993; Muth 1998, 5–27. 48–53; Dickmann 1999, 240–252; Lorenz 2008; Anguissola 2010, esp. 289–388; Haug 2014.

Fig. 15: Block 6 from room (5).

Ancient ceiling decoration and perception

The hierarchisation of ancient building complexes according to their ceilings, as has been shown for the ‘Casa di Augusto’, is not an invention of Late Republican domestic architecture, however. Both archaeological evidence and literary sources show that this phenomenon can, at the very least, be traced back to the Greek Classical period²⁹. Buildings such as the Erechtheion in Athens³⁰ or the *tholos* in the sanctuary of Asclepius at Epidauros³¹ show a much larger number of elaborately executed ornaments in the ceilings of their *cellae* when compared to those located in outside galleries. The tendency towards more lavishly decorated ceilings in *cellae* is also indicated by the use of precious materials. Flavius Josephus records that the ceiling in the inner sanctum of the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem was a sight to behold: it was decorated with gold, while the ceilings of all other rooms were simply made of cedar wood³². Building records, such as those for the Sanctuary of Asclepius in Epidauros, also confirm that gold and ivory were used to decorate *cella* ceilings. Although they were usually much smaller than those in the rest of the temple, the decoration applied to these ceilings could be worth up to five times as much, as attested by the inscribed building invoices discovered in Epidauros³³. The only archaeological evidence for the gilding of a *cella* ceiling was found in the Temple of Apollo Sosianus in Rome, which hails from the early Augustan

²⁹ For more details, see Lipps 2018, 91–142.

³⁰ Stevens 1927, 27–30. 87–91. 115–117.

³¹ IG IV2 103 Z. 125. 162. On this see Roux 1961, 131–200; Seiler 1986, 80–84; Lambrinoudakis 1988, 225–348; Prignitz 2014, esp. 219–223.

³² Jos. Ant. Iud. 8, 68.

³³ Prignitz 2014, 70 f. The inscriptions suggest that the literary sources attesting gold ceilings in temples are also referring to the more protected *cella* ceilings and not those in galleries. For a compilation of the literary sources, see Lipps 2018, 113–117.

period³⁴. The ceilings in the temple's gallery, in contrast, are decorated with single-recessed coffers produced in marble or stuccoed travertine³⁵.

In domestic architecture, the ceilings in large reception or dining rooms tended to be more elaborate in comparison to those located in other spaces³⁶. Although few complete ceilings have survived from pre-Augustan times³⁷, numerous literary sources describe ceilings in rooms hosting *symposia*. Their accentuation through the use of decoration can be traced back to the 5th century B.C., as one of Aristophanes' characters describes the ceiling in an *andron* as being particularly praiseworthy³⁸:

Βδ: Τὰ γόνατ' ἔκτεινε, καὶ γυμναστικῶς
ὕγρὸν χύτλασον σεαυτὸν ἐν τοῖς στρώμασιν.
Ἔπειτ' ἐπαίνεσόν τι τῶν χαλκωμάτων,
ὁροφὴν θέασαι, κρεκάδι' αὐλῆς θαύμασον:

BDELYKLEON: Extend your legs and pour yourself out on the coverlets in a fluid, athletic way. Then praise one of the bronzes, gaze at the ceiling, admire the room's curtains.

The tendency to emphasise the importance of particular rooms through ceiling decoration is also attested by the literary accounts of luxury 'yachts' in Alexandria and Syracuse. Much like *cellae* in temples and sanctuaries, the ceilings of the dining rooms were especially elaborate³⁹. The same applies to the extravagant ceiling in the palace of Cleopatra VII⁴⁰:

*Ipsa locus templi, quod vix corruptior aetas
exstruat, instar erat laqueataque tecta ferebant
divitias crassumque trabes absconderat aurum*

The palace itself was the size of a temple, such a temple as a corrupt age would hardly rear; the panels of the ceiling displayed wealth, and the rafters were hidden beneath a thick coating of gold.

Most of the other textual sources, including papyri⁴¹, describe ceilings in dining rooms of the elite during the Late Republican and the Early to Middle Imperial periods. Some of them must have been extraordinarily beautiful, as Manilius even compares them directly to temple ceilings⁴². The first references to gilded ceilings in private houses appear in the middle of the 1st century B.C. But it was also a common topic during the Augustan period, when sources describe the additional use

³⁴ Lauter 1986, 249 f.; Viscogliosi 1988, 138 f. (g); Mattern 2001, 59 Figs. 6–7.

³⁵ Coletta 2011, 183–185.

³⁶ Little is known about the ceilings in *atria*, peristyles and smaller rooms of private houses before Augustan times. Vitruvius describes the different kinds of ceiling constructions made of wood in *atria* rather matter-of-factly (Vitr. De arch. 6, 3, 1–2). According to him, the ceiling in the *tablinum* was characteristically high. (Vitr. De arch. 6, 3, 6). Those in the peristyle, however, were to be made from carved wood or decorated with stucco (Vitr. De arch. 6, 7, 3).

³⁷ Cf. Spinazzola 1953, 458–465 (on the Casa del Criptoportico) or Guidobaldi et. al. 2009, 145–153 Figs. 110–116 (for a stucco ceiling from the Villa dei Papiri).

³⁸ Aristoph. Vesp. 1215. Text after Wilson 2007, translation by Henderson 1998, 377. See also Philipp 1968, 34; Kiderlen 1995, 127 f.

³⁹ On the Nile yacht: Ath. 5, 205e–f. See also Caspari 1916, 1–74; von Normann 1996, 153–155. 158. On the yacht from Syracuse: Moschion = Ath. 5, 207c–e; Persson 1935.

⁴⁰ Lucan. 10, 111–122. Text after Badali 1992, translation by Duff 1962, 599. On the passage, see amongst others Leach 2004, 56.

⁴¹ A scene from a Zenon papyrus dated to the 3rd century B.C., for example, describes a person offering to decorate ceilings in dining rooms with specific designs: P CZ 3 59445; translation by Hunt – Edgar 1970, 396–399 no. 171. On the papyrus, see amongst others Wesenberg 1971/1972, 8 f.; Nowicka 1984, 256–259; Andreou 1988, 15 f.; Altekamp 1990, 56 f.; Walter-Karydi 1994, 44 with n. 39.

⁴² Manil. 5, 291–292.

of ivory and movable equipment for the ceilings in feast halls⁴³. This wealth of material was often condemned from a social and moral point of view, especially during the Late Republic and the Early Empire⁴⁴. Here, in this discussion about the appropriateness of ceiling decoration in the private sphere, the social dimension of *decor* is particularly well-documented.

The action context: staging the stuccoed ceiling in the tetrastyle *oecus*

Returning to the start of this paper, the ceiling in the tetrastyle *oecus* can probably be dated to the era just before the installation of gilded ceilings in private houses became increasingly common (Fig. 2). The function of this room can be deduced from literary descriptions, as well as the typology of its floor plan and location within the house⁴⁵. Its central position, size and accessibility via multiple doorways⁴⁶ make interpretations such as an advisory, reception or dining room plausible⁴⁷. For example, it would have been possible to receive guests through one door and then escort them out through the other⁴⁸. Therefore, more effort was put into the ceiling of the tetrastyle *oecus* than the adjoining ramp, as guests would have spent considerably more time admiring the ceiling in the former.

This ceiling would have been appreciated especially during evening receptions, when visitors would have awaited the arrival of the house owner. Perhaps there were even *klinai* or other seating arrangements placed between the pillars, where guests could rest and marvel at the room. In the winter, the light at sunset would have shone in from the *porticus* through the open doors. But the ceiling must have produced an even greater effect in the flickering light of torches after night set in. Because of the depth of the stucco and the reflection of light upon its shiny finish, shadows would have been cast throughout the room, in a way that could not have been achieved using two-dimensional media. It was exactly this glinting of light in the central nave that would have first caught the eye when walking in from the peristyle. Perhaps the *oecus* seemed to emerge straight out of a painting in the Second Style, except that here one could actually enter the aedicule. The exclusiveness of the room became clearer the closer one got to the entrance from the peristyle⁴⁹. It seems that we have encountered here a decorative phase in which it was not yet common to install (the often criticised) gilded ceilings in houses, a trend that became more popular during the Augustan period. But a special visual effect was achieved in a different, yet clever, way: through the creation of deeply recessed reliefs, bright white (marble-like) painting and a glossy finish.

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⁴³ See the compilation of sources in Lipps 2018, 136–141.

⁴⁴ See Lipps 2018, 182–184.

⁴⁵ Dickmann 1999, 164, 213 f.

⁴⁶ On the doorways: Borrello 2009, 14.

⁴⁷ Cf. Borrello 2009, 14 and Musatti 2009, 21 with different hypotheses on the function.

⁴⁸ On such *salutationes* see Goldbeck 2010.

⁴⁹ On the staging of such rooms from the peristyle (and vice versa), see Dickmann 1999, 359–364.

Illustration Credits

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 Fig. 8: Tomei 2014a, fold-out plate between 228 and 229.
 Fig. 9: Tomei 2014a, Pl. XLVII.
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