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Secular Architecture: Domestic

Abstract

The geographic focus of this discussion of Byzantine domestic architecture, from the late fourth to fifteenth centuries, will be on the Balkans and Asia Minor. Although more dwellings exist than any other type of structure within a settlement or outside it, emphasis has often been on large public buildings or the peristyle house rather than the range of housing units and their multifunctional nature. Those who study domestic architecture tend to look at palaces and other grand and richly decorated structures; only recently has attention been paid to lower-class and rural dwellings.

The chances of excavation often dictate our knowledge of ancient housing, which consists too frequently of isolated mosaic floors and incomplete ground plans. Preservation is usually limited to foundations or socles of walls so that nothing is known about windows, and upper floors are signaled only by surviving stairs. Compartments within houses are identified by shape and decoration, while the information provided by furnishings or artifact assemblages about possible, multiple functions of space is not collected or is ignored. Nevertheless, despite many excavated but unpublished houses, Byzantine dwellings may be described in some detail. [excerpt]

Keywords

Houses, Late Antique, Byzantine, peristyle

Disciplines

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Classics | History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology

CHAPTER 22

SECULAR ARCHITECTURE: DOMESTIC

CAROLYN S. SNIVELY

INTRODUCTION

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EARLY BYZANTINE HOUSING

Early Byzantine architecture developed from its Greek and Roman predecessors, influenced across the Mediterranean world by local conditions, building traditions, and available materials. Many Roman houses continued to exist into the Early Byzantine period; these might be redecorated, renovated, or rebuilt because of damage or destruction

by earthquake, fire, or violence, or to keep up with the latest styles. New examples of the peristyle house became scarce and then ceased in the sixth century, but the basic concept of rooms arranged around a courtyard continued into the Byzantine period. New dwellings were created, sometimes by subdivision of public buildings or urban villas, in other cases by fresh constructions. As the configuration of towns changed because of the elimination of temples, buildings for municipal government, theaters, and some baths, new spaces became available for residential construction.

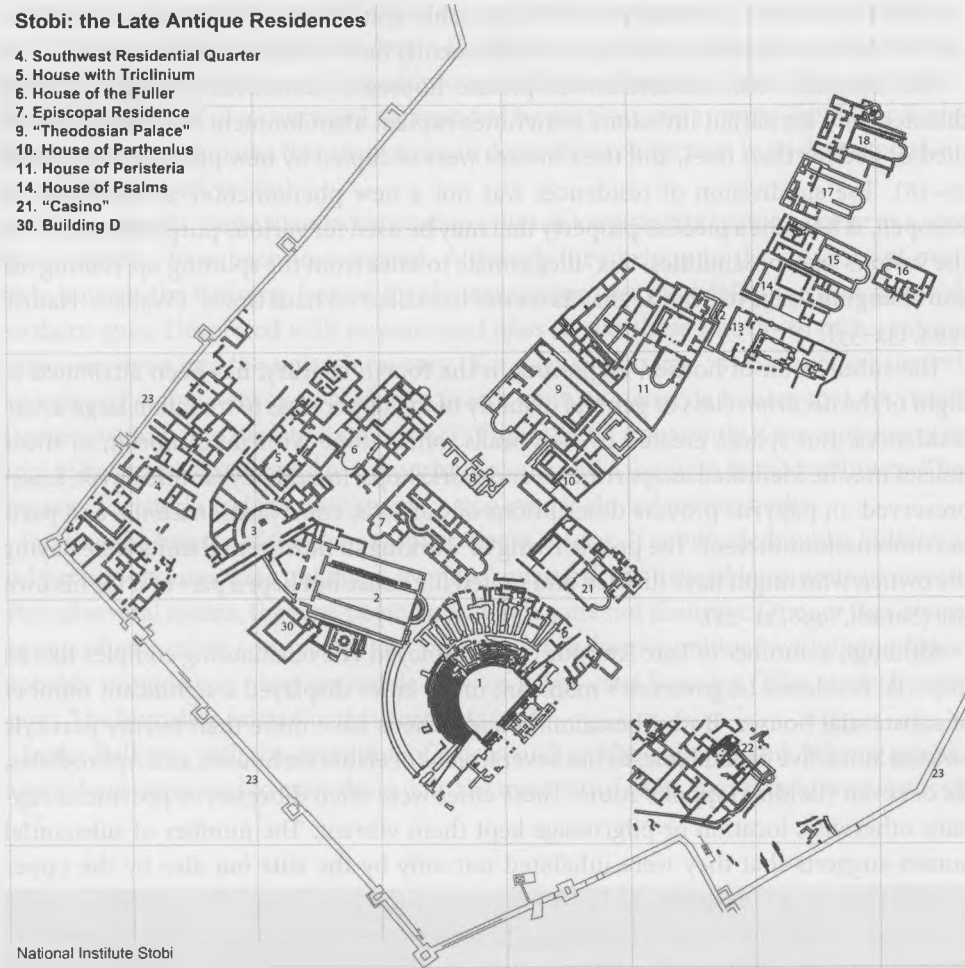
No Byzantine city exhibits the state of preservation seen at Pompeii, so questions about zoning or organization of residential quarters must be answered from partially investigated sites or literary sources. A number of legal regulations governed housing, its construction and reconstruction, and relations between residents of adjacent units. In addition to section C.8.10 of the *Code of Justinian* and later Byzantine laws, unofficial and local documents were compiled. In Constantinople—as in Late Antique Palestine, according to Julian of Ascalon—the regulations often refer to multistoried apartment buildings constructed around a central courtyard. Among the concerns are the type and location of windows, access to balconies from the street, and protection of the view, in Constantinople especially the view of the sea (Saliou 2007; Skalec 2012).

Zoning is never mentioned, and a novel of the emperor Leo VI even repealed the prohibition against intramural burial, no longer relevant by the tenth century. In fifth-century Constantinople the greatest number of houses and apartment buildings were located in northern regions VI, VII, and X, near the Golden Horn, but region X also included three palatial residences belonging to women of the imperial family (Magdalino 2001, 53–55; Anderson 2016). In northeastern Thessaloniki, space unused in the Roman period was available for the construction of peristyle houses (Karagianni 2012, 71). After a late fourth-century reorganization, peristyle houses spread across the middle terrace at Stobi in Macedonia (Figure 22.1); smaller dwellings were found on the northwest hill, in the southwest quarter, and in an extramural suburb. Clearly, people with money and influence were able to acquire more desirable building plots and houses, but the location of residential quarters depended on local conditions.

Work of whatever kind, for example, political, bureaucratic, governmental, professional, commercial, craft, and industrial, was closely associated with living quarters. The proprietor of a shop often lived behind or above it; the working space of a sculptor or shoemaker might form part of his house. Although a great deal of business, such as patron-client interactions or dining with one's political or business associates, had taken place in the Roman residence, the lack of identifiable governmental buildings in Early Byzantium suggests that more space for administrative and bureaucratic activities was located within residential complexes (Ellis 1988, 569). The *praetorium* of a civil governor, although considered a public building and differing in certain respects from the usual elite residence, nevertheless provides one obvious example (Lavan 2001). Another is the episcopal residence, where spaces for judicial proceedings, charitable endeavors, fundraising, religious instruction, and housing of clergy and guests might be required (Müller-Wiener 1989; Ceylan 2007). The presence of nonresidential activities complicates the modern interpretation and definition of ancient dwellings

Stobi: the Late Antique Residences

- 4. Southwest Residential Quarter
- 5. House with Triclinium
- 6. House of the Fuller
- 7. Episcopal Residence
- 9. "Theodosian Palace"
- 10. House of Parthenus
- 11. House of Peristeria
- 14. House of Psalms
- 21. "Casino"
- 30. Building D



National Institute Stobi

FIGURE 22.1. Plan of southwest Stobi. National Institution Stobi.

and residential complexes. Perhaps residents of an Early Byzantine city thought less about architectural types of buildings than about their functions—where in the mass of residential structures did one go to buy shoes or tools, present a petition, or pay one’s taxes.

A major issue in Early Byzantine architecture has been the subdivision of both public buildings and large houses in order to create apartments, small dwellings, and industrial or commercial establishments (Ellis 1988, 567–69; Ellis 2000, 110–12; Saradi 1998). Here too the legal sources provide information, of which the most relevant is that those who took over porticos, streets, and public buildings were not “squatters” but wealthy individuals who paid rents or fines to the authorities and in turn leased the subdivided properties to shopkeepers, craftsmen, and families (Saradi 1998, 18–20). The situation of former public buildings, such as theaters, stadia, and amphitheatres, is less clear. The

architectural pieces, especially the very reusable seat blocks, were removed and employed in new construction; houses were frequently built on the abandoned sites.

The situation with subdivision of private houses is somewhat different. Natural disasters and barbarian invasions sometimes explain abandonment and reuse; owners died or fled for their lives, and their houses were occupied by new people (Saradi 1998, 25–28). The subdivision of residences was not a new phenomenon, as illustrated at Pompeii. A house is a piece of property that may be used for various purposes and, given the various legal possibilities, it is “illegitimate to infer from the splitting up, renting off, and changing usage of a house that its owner has fallen on hard times” (Wallace-Hadrill 1994, 132–33).

The subdivision of houses, beginning in the fourth century, has been attributed to flight of the *decurion* class or general inability of the upper class to maintain large urban residences. But spaces created by new walls, often stone with mud mortar, in those houses may be identified as apartments and workshops; in Early Byzantine Egypt, leases preserved on papyrus provide descriptions of porticos, courtyards, *triclinia*, and parts or combinations thereof. The people living or working in those rental units were paying the owner, who might have divided and rented his house but kept a part of it for his own use (Saradi, 1998, 21–22).

Although a number of Late Antique cities displayed one outstanding complex like an imperial residence or governor’s mansion, many cities displayed a significant number of substantial houses. Both Thessaloniki and Athens have more than twenty peristyle houses; Stobi, five or six; Ephesus has several areas of elaborate houses; and Aphrodisias, six or seven (Baldini Lippolis 2001). These cities were often diocesan or provincial capitals; otherwise, location or pilgrimage kept them vibrant. The number of substantial houses suggests that they were inhabited not only by the elite but also by the upper middle class or alternatively, as Bowes argues, by the new men, “the *principales*, who seem to work in concert with imperial officials and the remnants of civic government” (Bowes 2010, 76). Another possible conclusion is that concentration of power and competition among members of the upper classes was taking place in a relatively small number of cities in Late Antiquity (Bowes 2010, 64–76; Mitchell 1996).

The peristyle house, described as the “ideal Roman house” and said “to represent the classical way of life,” is the domestic type most discussed (Ellis 1988, 565). Both the concept and numerous examples were inherited from the Roman period. The defining feature was the courtyard, flanked by colonnaded porticos on two to four sides. Behind the porticos stood rooms serving a variety of familial and public purposes, identified as reception rooms, dining rooms (*triclinia*), bedrooms, storerooms, and kitchen; larger houses might include audience chambers, secondary courtyards, private suites, baths, quarters for servants and slaves, even a private chapel. The arrangement of rooms in relation to the main courtyard and to one another varied by region and according to the needs and choices of the owner (Ellis 2000, 41). To what extent the organization of the peristyle house in Late Antiquity reflects the concentration of wealth and power in fewer hands together with changes in personal patronage and a greater need for privacy remains open for debate (Bowes 2010, 43–54).

Many well-known houses and villas belong to the category of the peristyle house, such as the Villa of the Falconer in Argos, the Atrium House at Aphrodisias, and the villa above the theater at Ephesus, along with scores of houses that made use of the very traditional arrangement of a courtyard surrounded by porticos and rooms. The major Early Byzantine innovation was the use of apses in domestic architecture, in triclinia and elsewhere (Bowes 2010, 54–60).

In Thessaloniki, more than twenty urban villas of varying size (some as large as 1,500 square meters) have been investigated. Although they belong to the category of peristyle houses, the defining feature for the excavators was the triclinium with a raised northern apse. Decorated with mosaics and *opus sectile*, these fourth- to fifth-century houses survived into the seventh century (Karagianni 2012, 70–75). Stobi offers several examples of completely excavated, late fourth-century peristyle houses that survived, after renovation, into the late sixth century (Figure 22.2). Apparently it was customary at Stobi to have a pool at the end of the peristyle court and a fountain in the triclinium. The House of Peristeria and the misnamed Casino even included private baths.

Finding the houses of the poor is surprisingly elusive. If subdivided public buildings and peristyle houses were not taken over by “squatters” but instead became apartments, often of several rooms, the rent-paying occupants were not destitute. One- or two-room houses, often next to courtyards, and shops or workshops combined with living space probably provide our most accessible view of lower-class housing (Ellis 2006; Bavant 2007). The homeless existed in this period as well.

In the Balkans, with the exception of places such as Thessaloniki and Athens, monumental housing ceased to exist along with the majority of cities, and little is known about

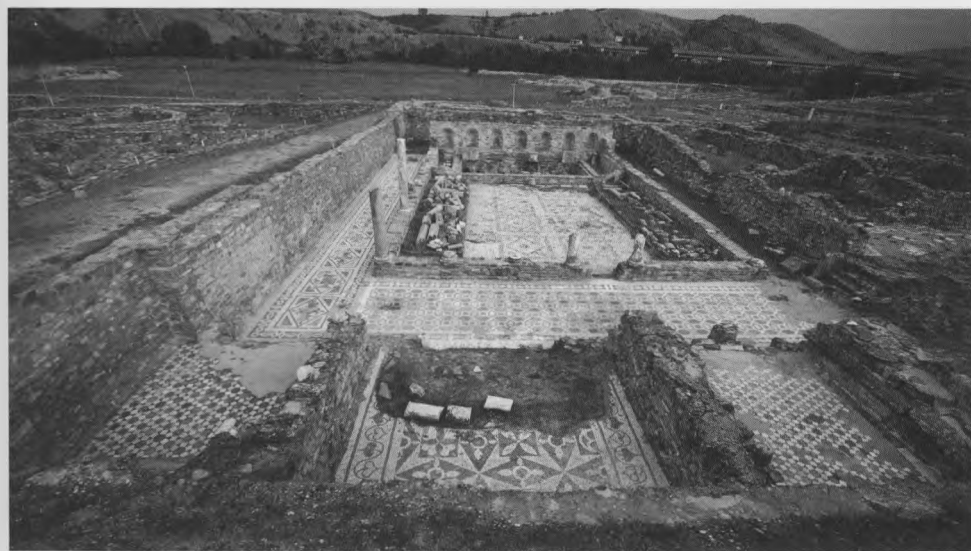


FIGURE 22.2. The peristyle courtyard of the “Theodosian Palace” at Stobi, from west. National Institution Stobi.

seventh- to ninth-century dwellings. Philippi offers a rare example of Early Byzantine houses that experienced numerous renovations and reconstructions but continued to function into the ninth or tenth century (Gounaris and Velenis 1996).

MIDDLE AND LATE BYZANTINE DWELLINGS

Earlier, it was posited that “There is no such thing as the Byzantine house, only Byzantine houses, of many types and categories, each meriting individual study” (Bouras 1982, 1). Now, however, it seems possible to state that, after regional variations and local availability of building materials are taken into account, many Byzantine houses in Greece appear to fall into two or three major categories: the courtyard house and the “longhouse” of one or more stories.

The courtyard dwelling was a typically urban form, found most often in the center of towns with Classical or Roman predecessors such as Athens, Corinth, Thebes, etc. Such complexes provided privacy, since the courtyard was usually not entered directly from the street, but it gave entry to most or all of the rooms surrounding it. Relatively large, with several rooms and a great deal of storage space, courtyard houses have been tentatively identified as belonging to merchants who dealt in agricultural or industrial products (Sigalos 2004, 62–63).

Recent excavations in the Athenian Agora revealed a number of Middle Byzantine courtyard houses on both sides of a street; they followed the orientation of Late Antique and earlier buildings and often used earlier walls as foundations (Figure 22.3).

The number of rooms varied from three or four to nine. Storage containers of various sizes and types were set densely into the floors of almost every room; they included *pithoi* (both ceramic and ones built of mortar and pieces of tile or stones) for liquids, and large pits with a flat floor, perhaps granaries. Wells, cisterns, and *bothroi* or cesspits were also noted. Camp assumed that domestic quarters were located on an upper floor. A small chapel, filled with ossuary cists, was tucked in among the houses (Camp 2007, 629–33, with earlier bibliography).

The identification of rock-cut complexes at Çanlı Kilise and Selime-Yaprakhisar in the Peristrema valley in western Cappadocia as residential rather than monastic has opened a new chapter in the study of Byzantine housing as well as providing examples of rural courtyard dwellings (Ousterhout 2005; Kalas 2006). A courtyard, usually carved into the sloping cliff face but sometimes completely quarried into bedrock, was the primary organizational feature. On one side of the courtyard rose a rock-cut architectural façade; at the bottom, an open arcade led into a portico. A large rectangular hall was often located behind the portico and a funerary chapel with burials nearby. Other identifiable rooms included the kitchen, a stable with mangers, cisterns, and a dovecote (for fertilizer), while the purpose of other rooms around the courtyard, frequently on two

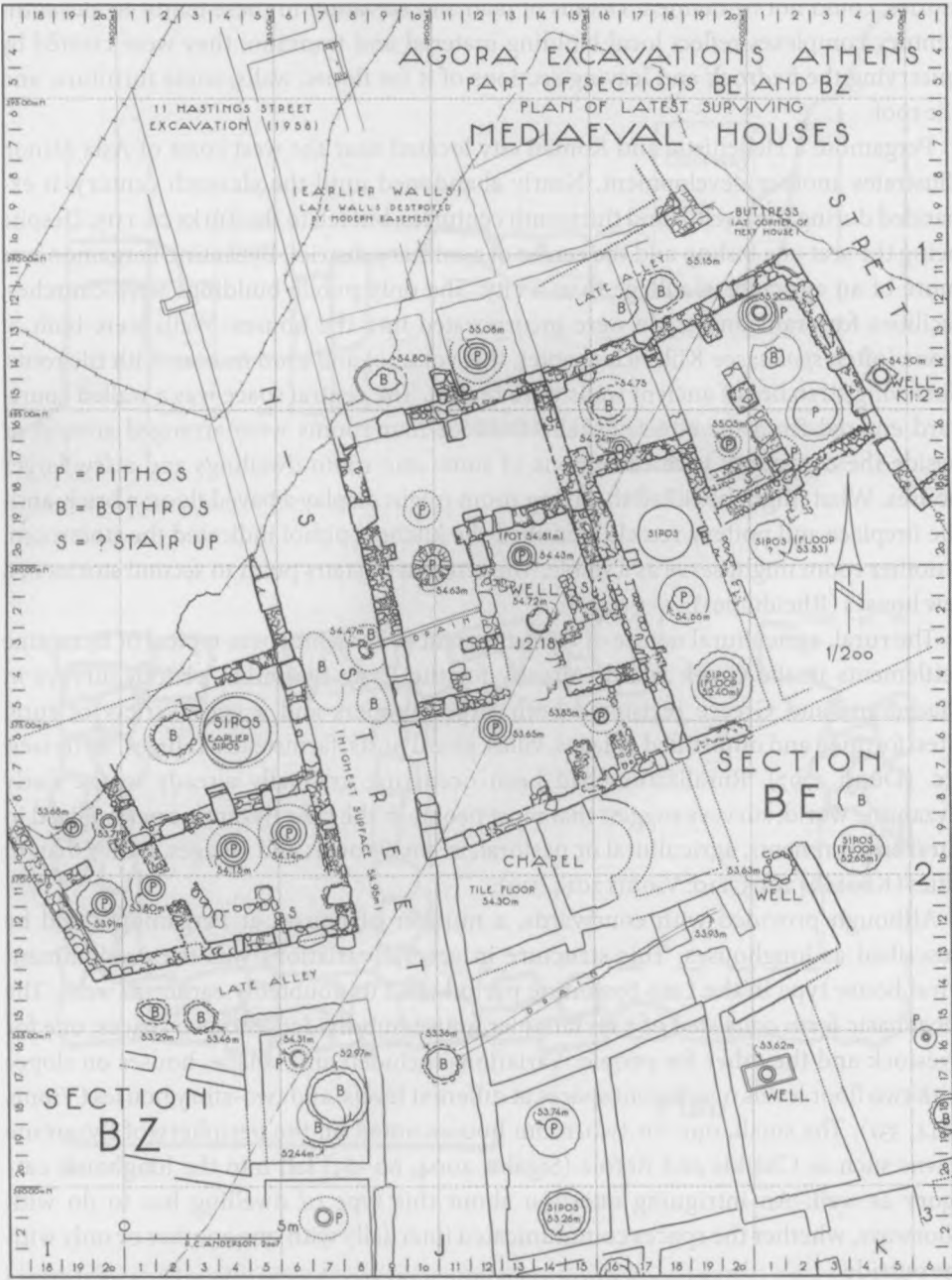


FIGURE 22.3. Plan of Middle Byzantine houses, Athenian Agora. Athenian Agora Excavations.

stories, could not be defined. Details of plan and elevation in these tenth- to eleventh-century complexes reflect local building material and tradition; they were created by quarrying the bedrock and leaving sections of it for floors, walls, some furniture, and the roof.

Pergamon, a Hellenistic and Roman city located near the west coast of Asia Minor, illustrates another development. Nearly abandoned until the eleventh century, it expanded during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but fell to the Turks ca. 1315. Despite being the seat of a bishop and the center of a military district, Byzantine Pergamon was more of an agricultural village than a city. The only public buildings were churches; facilities for crafts and trade were incorporated into the houses. Walls were built of stone (often *spolia*; see Kiilerich chapter, this volume) and mud mortar, with tile roofs. Surviving stretches of ancient walls were reused. The central space was a walled courtyard entered from the street; usually three or four rooms were arranged around or beside the courtyard, with exceptions of some one-room dwellings and a few larger houses. What might be called the living room might display a paved floor; a brick-and-tile fireplace and pottery vessels identified the kitchen; pithoi indicated the storeroom. Another room might serve as a stable. The remains of stairs point to second stories in a few houses (Rheidt 1991).

The rural, agricultural nature of the settlement at Pergamon was typical of Byzantine settlements in the Greek world. Already for the Early Byzantine period, surveys in Macedonia and Greece registered both large numbers and a wide variety of rural sites: fortified and unfortified villages, villas, guard posts, farmsteads, refuges, fortresses, etc. (Dunn 1997). Ruralization had been occurring gradually already in the Early Byzantine world; surveys suggest that most people in the later Byzantine period lived in rural environments, agricultural or pastoral, in small towns and villages, rather than in cities (Kourelis 2005, 120; Vionis 2014, 319).

Although provided with courtyards, a number of houses at Pergamon could be described as longhouses. This structure in several variations was the predominant rural house type in the Late Byzantine period (and undoubtedly earlier as well). The most basic form consisted of a rectangular house, subdivided into two spaces, one for livestock and the other for people. Variations included an L-shape, houses on slopes with two floor levels or adjacent spaces at different levels, and two-story houses (Vionis 2014, 331). The small, one- or two-room houses noted on the periphery of Byzantine towns such as Chalkis and Beroia (Sigalos 2004, 60–63) fall into the longhouse category as well. An intriguing question about this type of dwelling has to do with doorways, whether the spaces communicated internally with one another or only with the outside.

The Minnesota Morea project carried out a survey of domestic architecture in the northwestern Peloponnesus. The collected data allow the medieval rural settlement in the mountainous region and its houses to be defined. In villages located on steep slopes below small hilltop fortresses with cisterns and observation towers, freestanding houses followed the slopes in order to create two floor levels, each with its own doorway, within a single long room (Figure 22.4). Livestock occupied the lower compartment and

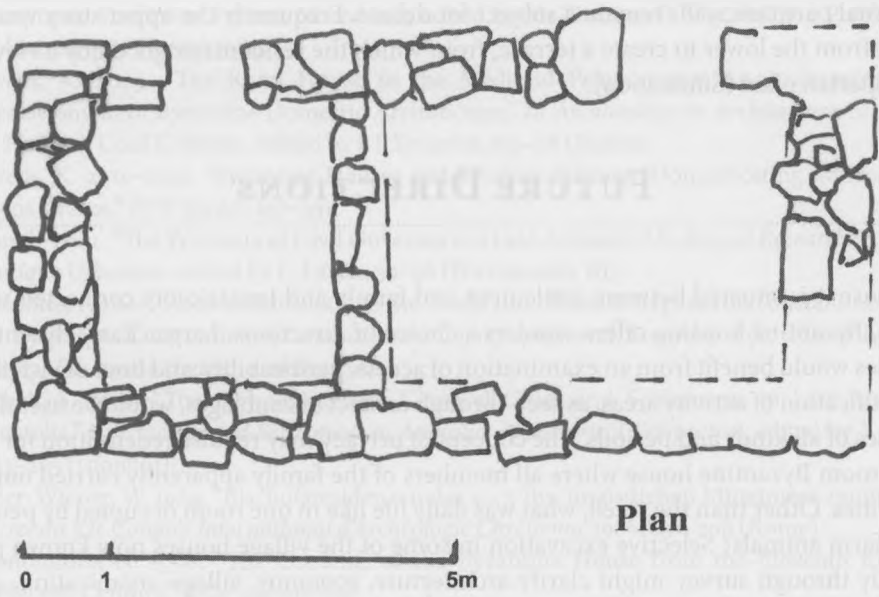
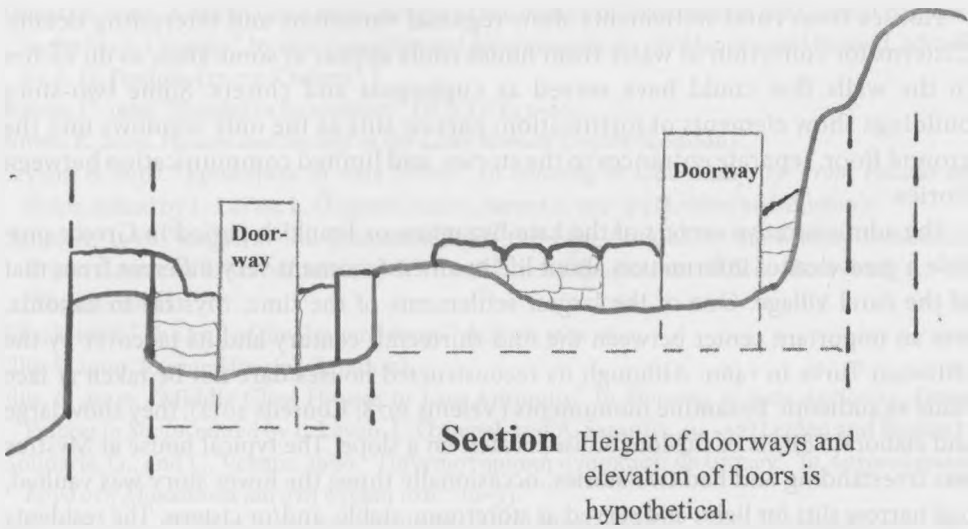


FIGURE 22.4. Plan of medieval house 51 at Santomeri. Kostis Kourelis.

the family the upper one. The construction was of local stone, with ceramic tile roofs. A standard, 5 × 5 m building module was observed, with houses ranging from one module in size to a maximum of six. Small, single-aisle churches were the only public buildings (Kourelis 2005, 121–24).

Houses from rural settlements show regional variations and interesting details. Cisterns for collection of water from house roofs appear at some sites, as do niches in the walls that could have served as cupboards and closets. Some two-story buildings show elements of fortification: narrow slits as the only windows into the ground floor, separate entrances to the stories, and limited communication between stories.

The administrative centers of the Late Byzantine or Frankish period in Greece provide a great deal of information about life in an environment very different from that of the rural village. One of the largest settlements of the time, Mystras in Laconia, was an important center between the mid-thirteenth century and its takeover by the Ottoman Turks in 1460. Although its reconstructed houses dare not be taken at face value as authentic Byzantine monuments (Velenis 1978; Kourelis 2012), they show large and elaborate forms of the longhouse located on a slope. The typical house at Mystras was freestanding and had two stories, occasionally three; the lower story was vaulted, had narrow slits for light, and served as storeroom, stable, and/or cistern. The residents lived in the large room on the upper story, with an unknown number of possessions (Oikonomides 1990), large windows, niches for storage, and possibly even inside toilets. Internal partition walls remain a subject for debate. Frequently the upper story was set back from the lower to create a terrace, from which the residents might enjoy a view of the Spartan plain (Sinos 2009).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Because it is situated between settlement and family and inextricably connected with both, Byzantine housing offers scholars a choice of directions. Larger Early Byzantine houses would benefit from an examination of access, permeability, and lines of visibility. Identification of activity areas, as seen through artifact assemblages, would be useful for houses of all kinds and periods. The concept of privacy may require redefinition for the one-room Byzantine house where all members of the family apparently carried out all activities. Other than the smell, what was daily life like in one room occupied by people and farm animals? Selective excavation in some of the village houses now known primarily through survey might clarify architecture, economy, village organization, and patterns of daily life.

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