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Approaching Home: New Perspectives on the Domestic Interior
Vers la maison : nouvelles perspectives sur l'intérieur domestique

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Thematic reviews

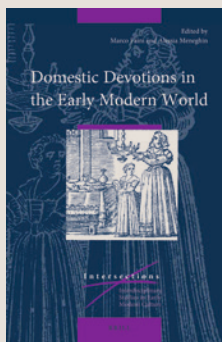
Recensions thématiques

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Marco Faini and Alessia Meneghin, editors of *Domestic Devotions in the Early Modern World*, have assembled a collection of sixteen essays that explore global iterations of private piety, connected through their European-derived early modern periodization between the years 1400 and 1800. The volume is part of the European Research Council-funded Domestic Devotions project, which produced a series of conferences, catalogues, edited books, and articles on early modern European domestic topics.¹

In the Introduction, the editors employ Richard Trexler's definition of "religion" as a "system of reverential behaviour" (4), but their use of "domestic" is less clear. Ideas of home and household are sought via the distinctions made between what constitutes the public and the private. The editors suggest that, within the essays, "the term 'domestic' seems to allude to a space of one's own, rather than specifically a house" (19). Furthermore, they ask if we might "detect

a functional differentiation and reorganization of domestic settings into several specialized spaces devoted to practising one's devotions?" (10), but neither the editors nor the contributing authors explicitly return to this question. With few exceptions, the book does not focus on the relationship between architecture and practice, whether through design or associated behaviours.

Seeking to embrace a "connective history" approach, *Domestic Devotions in the Early Modern World* is organised into six thematic sections on various aspects of individual and household religious practice, ranging from "Confessional Confrontation" to "Gendering Devotion." The variety of case studies provided by the contributors serves to counter monolithic interpretations of private devotion without critiquing whether the concepts of the domestic and the early modern are themselves useful outside of a determined scholarly sphere and without elucidating whether "world"

parameters for domestic devotions might differ discernably from central and western European interpretations and understandings. It may be that the grouping of the chapters was intended to address this ongoing dialogue. The editorial discussion jumps between chapters rather than taking a linear approach to the six thematic sections. This suggests to the reader that the relationship between essays is fluid and malleable.

The editors' efforts to reach beyond previous discussions of European themes leads to instances where the introduction mis-labels (as in the case of a John Donne poem) and vastly generalises (as in their comments on Ottoman conceptualisations of privacy) objects and practices. Future projects would benefit from the inclusion of scholars of Buddhism, denominational Christianity, Islam, and Judaism (all faith traditions featured in this volume) on the editorial team.

In Part One, "Complicating the Sacred Space: Private and Public," Cristina Osswald's chapter, explores domestic devotions in eighteenth-century Brazil under colonial Catholic Portuguese rule. The common practices of cloistering young women in family houses, creating "saints' rooms" with sacred relics, divine figures and ex-votos with healing powers, and the erection of private altars, elite family chapels, and rural chapels on verandahs all allocated permanent settings for religious purposes. Osswald contrasts the virtuous (if often performative) domestication of religiosity with the personal, often apotropaic uses of relics and sacred objects and assemblies deemed sacrilegious by authorities. Dotan Arad examines the congregational practices of Jews living in the Ottoman Empire. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, following Sultan Bayezid II's ban on the construction of new places of worship, Jewish communities established small synagogues that could exist undetected within privately owned houses. Arad scrutinizes court documents from

Cairo, Jerusalem, Damascus, Istanbul, and Salonica that record cases where authorities uncovered the religious use of these houses. The congregations were required to refurbish the spaces as residences, revealing the complete conversion to synagogue use that distinguished them from other dwellings.

Part Two, “Confessional Confrontation,” includes Kathleen Ashley’s examination of the criminal dossier of Etienne Mathieu, a sixteenth-century French Protestant Huguenot who was accused by his neighbour of singing vernacular psalms in his home. In the uncertain religious environment of the late 1500s, Mathieu argued that he had the right to private devotional song, but was fined by the town council, highlighting the political regulation of private practice. Martin Christ looks at the sixteenth-century deathbed rituals of the minority Catholics of Upper Lusatia. Johann Leisentrit’s Catholic parish book, illustrated with deathbed woodcuts, was used to instruct bed-ridden Catholics out of the fear that they could be converted to Lutheranism in their weakened state. Christ describes the woodcut representation of a priest figure “at the intersection of the two spaces...between public and domestic, sacred and profane, inside and outside, life and death” (91). Borja Franco Llopis and Francisco Javier Moreno Díaz del Campo discuss the meaning of devotional imagery in the private Christian practices of sixteenth-century Moriscos (Spanish Muslim converts to Christianity). The authors seek new methodological approaches to the domestic demonstrations of Catholicism and the private continuations of Islamic traditions by delving into household inventories and Inquisition documents. These note the presence of Virgin Mary images alongside paintings of Mecca and, possibly, metal representations of the Prophet Muhammad. Soyeon Kim sheds light on Korea during the

sixteenth-century Chosŏn Dynasty through surviving Buddhist scripture and paintings, the creation of which are rarely described in period texts. State Confucianism was practiced in “recombination and coexistence” (126) alongside such private, hidden Buddhist devotions.

Part Three, “Family Life”, includes Torsten Wollina’s chapter, which focuses on Prophetic devotional practices in fifteenth-century Muslim homes in Damascus. The diary of notary Ahmad Ibn Ṭawq, kept between 1480 and 1501, highlights the domestic use of texts. Wollina argues that book circulation connected practices in settings with multiple educational, devotional, and domestic uses, such as mosques, Sufi lodges, and religious schools. This complicated the distinctions between public and private, sacred and profane. Marion H. Katz delves further into Ahmad Ibn Ṭawq’s diaries to examine his description of *mawlid* commemorations of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. Celebrated as festive gatherings in the home, the *mawlid* brought blessings and the symbolic presence of the Prophet to the household. Katz categorises this as “a form of pious hospitality” (172) that also includes gatherings for life-cycle events such as births, weddings, and circumcisions. Jungyoon Yang’s chapter focuses on the Calvinist genre of *epithalamia*, verses celebrating a wedding, in the northern Netherlands during the seventeenth century. Protestant authorities did not consider marriage a sacrament as Catholics did, but sought pious preparations for married life; bespoke illustrations and virtuous, Biblical exemplars became part of the genre. Yang demonstrates how the eroticised, lascivious classical entertainments featuring the nuptial bed were replaced with visual and textual themes, emblems, and poems in booklets that encouraged piety, propriety, and honour while sealing the Calvinist marriage bond.

Part Four, “The Materiality of Devotion,” opens with Suzanna

Ivanič’s discussion of small amulets, valued in seventeenth century Prague but largely relegated to museum storage today. Both Protestants and Catholics paired silver-mounted wolves’ teeth, small stones, and other natural materials in boxes alongside religious texts and objects. Ivanič interprets this as a demonstration of the acceptance of natural philosophy, and the belief that divine power flows through the natural world. Igor Sosa Mayor investigates the enthusiastic excavation of supposed fourth-century Christian relics in Arjona, Spain in 1628. Creating a parallel to the Catholic Church’s growing ecclesiastical investigation of relics, the town generated a host of lay-experts who sought the production of religious knowledge by testing verification methods and uses for the bones within their homes. Kathleen M. Ryor’s chapter on the late Ming ink paintings of sixteenth and seventeenth century Buddhist literati in China takes the stylistic elements of these works, executed and viewed in the home as part of Chan Buddhist mindfulness practices, to draw new conclusions about personal devotion from their brush strokes.

Part Five, “Prayer and Meditation,” includes Hester Lees-Jeffries’ study on the role of the bed and linens in encounters with the divine. Through a discussion of English Protestant poet-preacher John Donne’s 1624 poem “Hymn to God my God in my sickness,” she posits that beds were spaces of rest, procreation, and death, and were sites of meditations “on mortality, on the Incarnation, on the humanity of Christ” (286) and literal enfoldment within divine love. Hanneke van Asperen engages metal badges that survive both as extant attachments and imprints in late fifteenth-century French and Flemish devotional books. Such badges were purchased at pilgrimage sites for personal collections and gifts and were also produced with depictions of popular saints. Van Asperen argues that books became containers for

these small religious objects, and that badges were sewn onto the vellum to mark favourite passages.

In Part Six, “Gendering Devotion,” Debra Kaplan opens with a look at Jewish practice in the Holy Roman Empire, and the complex overlap of domestic and communal spaces. By parsing texts, objects, and practices, including the imagery of a silver bride-gift, Italian custom books with block-printed illustrations, baths, devotional rooms, and the baking of family bread in communal or Christian-owned ovens, Kaplan determines that the gendered centrality of religion (rather than the home itself) gave meaning to work, study, and daily devotions. Hildegard Diemberger examines the life of Chokyi Dronma, an elite Buddhist woman who married, gave birth, and entered a monastery in fifteenth-century Tibet. Hers is the oldest known Tibetan biography of a female spiritual master. Passages recounting her daily prayers and family struggles show that domestic lay devotions “offered a powerful framework within which a woman could deal with the wide range of challenges that shaped her life” (349).

In a comparative sense, this book’s chapters demonstrate that public conventions of spiritual authority and government are frequently set aside in favour of the creation of a different “religious reality” outside monastery, mosque, and church. Each author opens up connections between material culture and religious practice with attentiveness to the personal-private devotions of individual believers via their small, collected objects and sacred pursuits. Comparative approaches to private piety embrace the materiality of texts, diaries, devotional objects, paintings, and furniture. These essays are the strength of the book and provide fascinating analyses while contributing new interpretations of objects that are little studied, in some cases precisely because they were created and used in acts of private piety. This spotlight on devotional objects

outside elite and church patronage circles constitutes the larger contribution of the volume to the literature, rather than the notion of what constitutes domestic devotions on the world stage. ¶

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1. Maya Corry, Marco Faini, and Alessia Meneghin, eds., *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 2018); Abigail Brundin, Deborah Howard, and Mary Laven, eds., *The Sacred Home in Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). See http://domesticdevotions.lib.cam.ac.uk/?page_id=846.

Jenn Cianca

Sacred Ritual, Profane Space: The Roman House as Early Christian Meeting Place
Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2018

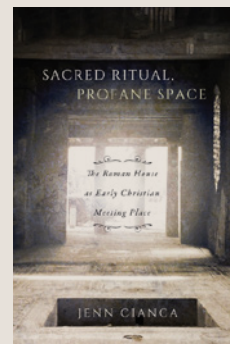
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Evanthia Baboula

Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework, Jenn Cianca’s *Sacred Ritual, Profane Space* is concerned with how the (Roman) houses of the earliest Christians could accommodate their new cultic practices. Presuming that not everyone converted to Christianity at the same time, what attitudes did the concept of “pollution,” by earlier or continuing non-Christian rites, engender? The book attempts to build a theory of early Christian space by emphasizing the human agency in environments that encompassed cultural contradictions by housing

monotheistic along with polytheistic rituals.

The author acknowledges the problem of the paucity of material evidence that might prove or disprove the views presented. It is well known that in its first two centuries of existence Christianity spread quickly, although it did not yet seem to have developed a distinctive material culture and therefore its own exclusive visual forms. Christians seem mostly to have used pre-existing artistic forms and manufacturing traditions, on the way imbuing these with new meanings. This process also did not happen uniformly across the vast Roman empire. Specialized Christian spaces first find their way into the archaeological record from the middle of the third century but are sparse and scattered until they become more numerous in the fourth century.



Given that a very important part of the affiliation to Christianity was the consumption of communal meals and that textual sources indicate the use of house-churches, the converted Romans therefore in all probability used houses for cultic purposes, at first without much or any adjustment to their interior spaces.

To address the scarce material remains, the first three chapters lay out the types of dwelling in which the earliest Christians may have congregated. The diversity of possible spaces, according to the author and much scholarship from the 1990s onwards,