Domus Ecclesiae

1. Definitions. There were no buildings erected solely for the Christian cult prior to the time of Constantine I. Like other cult groups in the Roman Empire, e.g., Mithraism, Christian communities adapted the spatial-social living and production unit of the ancient house for their word and communion services (Brenk: 49–128). These can be differentiated into five types of use (White):

1. the house community in a city or district, whose regular ritual meetings took place in a room provided by one of the Christian house mothers/fathers or matrons/patrons,
2. the chapel in a private house, which was established as a reserved space for ritual purposes by renovation or separation, and used by a family or other Christian group.
3. the house church (*domus ecclesiae*) in a now uninhabited private house, which was established through renovation and was usually a centrally-located meeting place for a local community, and which, as a consecrated place, was used exclusively for ritual purposes, and
4. the especially large house church (also known as a hall church, *aula ecclesiae*), which through intensive renovation maximized the available house space for meetings.

In the last two cases, the Christian building was cared for and guarded by a custodian. The last building to mention is

5. the Christian community center (cf. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 7.30.19, ca. 272 CE in Syrian Antioch), formed by joining together a number of adjacent individual buildings, and which, in addition to ritual and catechetic rooms, provided living quarters for the clergy and functioned as a hostel for itinerant missionaries.

For the quantitative growth of a local Christian community, as well as its social and religious acceptance in the polis, the adaptation of the house could be accomplished in stages. Christian persecution, which led to confiscation or even destruction of meeting rooms (e.g., in the Numidian Cirta, North Africa, s. *Gesta apud Zenoph[f]ilum* [CSEL 26.185–97]), set the community back to the status of a house community (type 1).

Through archaeology, the existence of the chapel in a private house and the house church could be shown (for private house: type 2, e.g., Kefar ʿOthnay, Palestine, preliminary report: Tepper/di Segni, and for house church: type 3, e.g., from Dura-Europos; regarding other findings which are difficult to verify, see Riesner; Mell: 21–22).

2. On the History of the House Community and House Church. The practice of holding regular cult meetings in pagan private homes characterizes the entire post-Easter origins (exceptions: Acts 19 : 9; *Mart. Paul* 1 [104.4]; Rufinus, *Clem. Recogn.* 2.11). If literary evidence for Palestine (Acts 1 : 13–

14; 12:12–14), Syria (9:11), Asia Minor (1 Cor 16:19; Phlm 2), Greece (Rom 16:1–2, 23; 1 Cor 16:15), and Rome (Rom 16:5, 14–15) – scattered as well over the first three centuries (Mark 10:29–30; Acts 10:27; 16:15; 20:7–9; Col 4:15; *Mart. Justin* 3.1; *Acts Paul* 3.5, 7; *Acts John* 26, 106–10; *Acts Thom.* 131, 138) – can be furnished (Mell: 33–57), the house communities (type 1) belonged to the early Christian-cultic normalcy: Within the shelter of the house, the worship service developed, the integration of the heterogeneous milieu of members was accomplished, and connected the new community with the network of clients and friendships.

Problems for the ecclesiological unity were caused by the fractionation of the house communities by attitude and/or class (cf. 1 Cor 1:12–16; 11:18–19) as well as the coinciding of the charismatically equal congregation (cf. 12–14) with the hierarchically-led household (cf. Phlm 16). It was beneficial that the heads of the households caring for the house communities in missionary work were both passive (cf. Acts 16:15; 18:3, 7; Rom 16:23; Phlm 22) and active (cf. Acts 18:18; Rom 16:1–3; 1 Cor 16:17).

The establishment of a house church (type 3) in a private house through consecration and addition of a proclamation seat has been proved for the middle of the 3rd century CE for the Syrian Antiochia (cf. Rufinus, *Clem. Recogn.* 10.71.2, also Lactantius, *Mort.* 12.2–5 for Nicomedia in Bithynia), and it can be assumed from the restitution edicts of the Roman Caesar Maximian (286–305 CE, cf. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 9.10.8), Galerius from 311 CE (cf. 8.17.9; Lactantius, *Mort.* 34.4 [ed. Creed: 52]) and Licinius (308–24 CE, cf. 48 [Creed: 68ff.]) that Christians were to receive their "holy sanctuaries" (cf. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 7.13).

Although the house churches were still used regularly (Gamber: 33–62), their time was over when emerging communities, strengthened by persecution, decided to build new churches (cf. Porphyry, fr. 76 according to Macarius Magnes, *Apocriticos* 4.21 from 226 CE onward) or when individual cities allowed larger Christian population segments to erect public buildings (oldest basilicas in Rome and Tyre, 313 CE onward or 316/7 CE, cf. Brandenburg).

3. The House Community and House Church in Dura-Europos. The results of the archaeological and iconograpic work conducted at the Christian "domus", or home, in the Roman garrison town Dura-Europos in Syria were published by Kraeling.

Due to the only inscription in room 4 B with a date reference on a layer of plaster under the surface, the construction of a typical house close to the west wall can be dated to 232/3 CE (Kraeling: 34–35). The modification of the house into a house church (type 3) occurred in order to offer the large influx of Christian population, caused by the massive expansion of Dura-Europos. The growing community may have been led by a bishop (cf. the controversial Chronicle of Arbela 8 [31]).

The house church was architecturally accomplished mainly by a) the construction of a bench on a street side, b) benches in the inner courtyard including stone paving and closing of a cistern, c) the removal of a wall between room 4 A and 4 B with removal of a divan and construction of a ventilation window (also room 5) as well as a platform, d) a bench in room 6 with the construction of an accessible water basin (fill depth: 0.96m) under a walled aedicule as well as a half-rounded adaptation of an existing niche with a mounting for a pedestal and e) the construction of (custodian?) living quarters on the upper floor. Room 6 was undoubtedly used as a baptistery and the easterly-oriented rooms 4 (approx. 50–60 seats on the floor) and 5 together with the courtyard used for worship gatherings. The two assembly rooms, connected by a door, accommodated the community members – strictly separated by gender – participating in the Eucharist (cf. *Did. apost.* 2.57.3–5; 63.3, 32), while the courtyard was designated for those relegated there by church discipline as well as for non-Christian guests (cf. also the alphabet carved in the walls, Kraeling: 89–97).

The publicly-known house church was used for a maximum of 10–15 years when in 256/57 CE, as part of the Roman defense measure against the invading Sassanids under Shapur I, it was closed and buried under a rampart. Since the common Christian name of the owner "Dorotheos" (= gift of God) appears in the inscription, it is assumed that he provided his private living quarters, previously a house community (type 1) (Mell: 158–59).

Only parts – a total of eight or nine paintings plus a ceiling painting imitating a starry night sky with eight-pointed stars – of the baptistery which was, presumably, completely painted in frescoes and with a donor's/artist's inscription from a Christian named "Proklos" (Mell: 161–62) could be reconstructed [regarding the three-part series of images of the resurrection, cf. Mell: 141–49]). Iconologically, the "didactic" pictures present a biblically-based theology of baptism over the sacramental salvation of created humanity to the "new creation" (cf. 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15), which is in contrast to Christian-Gnostic heresy (see the additional picture of the fall of humanity to the salvific image of the divine shepherd, cf. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.23.1, 8, and in this regard Mell: 265–87). Together with the installations, they serve the two-part baptism ritual of the (old) Syrian church consisting of a pre-baptismal anointing (cf. *Did. apost.* 16; Ephraem the Syrian, *De epiphania* 5.9–11, and Yarnold: 683–84) and subsequent submersion or perfusion baptism.

Images which refer to NT Gospel texts – including the 9 m long, three-part series of images of the

resurrection of Christ with 2 x five female figures – are likely based on the Gospel harmony, common in the Syrian church until ca. 450 CE, the so-called "Diatessaron" of the church father Tatian (approx. 170/180 CE, cf. Petersen; Mell: 205–52), of which, with the Greek Dura Fragment No. 0212, only one single manuscript fragment exists (Mell: 189–204).

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See also →Dura-Europos