HOUSES OF CLASSICAL ATHENS

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AN ANCIENT TRAVELLER who visited Athens in the early third century B.C. was plainly recording his own impressions when he wrote that anyone approaching Athens for the first time would find it almost incredible that a city so poorly laid out, badly supplied with water, and crowded with mean little houses could really be that famous Athens of which he had heard so much—until he saw its wonderful public buildings (*FHG* 2.254). And on several occasions the fourth-century orator, Demosthenes (3.26, 13.29, 23.207), rhetorically called attention to the undistinguished simplicity of the homes of the great leaders of early fifth-century Athens, the men who had saved Greece from Persian tyranny. Remarks such as these, too hastily and uncritically accepted, have furnished generations of compilers of books on Greek Life with a splendid opportunity to laud the Athenians for practising such noble self-restraint in their private lives, satisfied themselves to live in plain little mud-brick huts on crowded, narrow alleys so long as they might with marble Parthenons glorify their city and their gods.

This impression that living-conditions, not only in Athens but in Classical Greece in general, were about on a par with our modern big-city slums, has not yet disappeared[1] in spite of the discovery nearly half a century ago of large and commodious houses at the site of the small north-Greek town of Olynthus, houses that can be dated to the three-quarters of a century between the *synoikismos* of the city about 432 B.C. and its destruction by Philip of Macedon in 348 B.C. Most of the hundred houses excavated at Olynthus in four campaigns between 1928 and 1938 by expeditions from the Johns Hopkins University—the author participated in the campaigns of 1931 and 1934—measured nearly sixty feet square and were trimly arranged in rectangular blocks three hundred feet long by one hundred and twenty feet wide intersected by streets seventeen, or in one case twenty-four, feet broad. Each block of ten houses was constructed as a single unit with common walls between the individual houses which adhered to a general pattern evidently laid down by the supervising architect or architects (Fig. 1). Yet the prospective resident was evidently permitted to modify the details of the plan to suit his own taste and requirements, for no two houses have exactly the same arrangement of rooms.[2]

[1]Even H. A. Thompson and R. E. Wycherley in their cautious appraisal of the situation tend to underrate the quality of Athenian domestic architecture in the fifth century B.C., *The Agora of Athens* (Princeton 1972) 173 ff., esp. 174, 182 f.

[2]D. M. Robinson and J. W. Graham, *Excavations at Olynthus 8, The Hellenic House*—hereafter *Olyn.* 8—Parts 1 and 3, chap. 1.

The lucky discovery during the 1934 campaign of a deed-of-sale inscription in the fields some distance from the main excavations led to the uncovering of the finest and best preserved house that has yet come to light at Olynthus (*Olyn.* 8, 55-63). The Villa of Good Fortune, as we named it (Fig. 2), was twenty-five feet longer than the normal houses of the blocks on the North Hill and found room on the ground floor for a full peristyle court (*h, k, l, m, o*), a kitchen (*b, c*), two large and one small service rooms (*j, n, i*), and for four rooms with pebble-mosaic floors which evidently constituted the *diaiteteria* or living-rooms of the house (*ag* and *ef*); a substantial stairway from the court led to an upper storey containing, no doubt, the bedrooms.

Two of the mosaics, in *ef*, bore such inscriptions in black pebbles as "Good Luck," and "Fair Fortune," while the two others contained elaborate patterns and mythological scenes and covered the floors of the *androns* or men's dining-room (*a*), and of its anteroom (*g*) (Pls 1ab, 2c). The characteristic feature of a Greek andron from the fifth to the third century B.C. was its plastered floor which, for a breadth of about three feet around the walls, was raised one or two inches above the central area of the room. On the low, continuous platform thus formed rested the dining-couches used for Greek supper-parties such as the one pictured in Plato's *Symposium* which took place at the home of the tragic poet Agathon.[3]

The mosaic forming the entry-panel of the floor of the andron of the Villa of Good Fortune consisted of two goat-legged figures of Pan on either side of a large calyx-crater (Pl. 2c), while in the centre of the floor appeared Dionysus riding in a chariot drawn by two leopards and escorted by a company of dancing maenads and satyrs (Pl. 1a). In the anteroom beautifully executed wave, meander, palmette, and tendril patterns framed a long panel representing Thetis and two other Nereids who were riding sea-horses and bringing new armour made by Hephaestus for Achilles (Pl. 1b). It is clear that whoever lived in this house enjoyed considerable splendour and comfort, and many of his fellow-citizens must have lived hardly less well.

In Athens it is impossible to locate and excavate entire blocks of houses, or even entire houses, as we did at Olynthus, for the dwellings in which Pericles, Plato, and their contemporaries lived have fallen in ruins long ago and now lie deeply buried beneath successive layers of Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Turkish, and modern buildings and streets. None of the major archaeological excavations throughout the city over the last hundred years has yielded anything but scanty by-products in the form of domestic architecture. The most impressive example, possessing a well preserved andron-anteroom complex with a pebble

[3]On the andron in general see *Olyn.* 8, 171–185.

mosaic in simple patterns, was found in the 1890's by the famous Wilhelm Dörpfeld, who excavated with Schliemann at Troy, Mycenae, and Tiryns. But Dörpfeld was too engrossed in searching for that important key to Athenian topography, the nine-spouted fountain-house known as the Enneakrounos, which he expected to discover nearby, to spare time to publish so much as a plan or a picture of an ordinary domestic dwelling or its pebble-mosaic floor.[4] In 1964 this house was rescued from oblivion by the American School of Classical Studies under the supervision of the author and cleared of the accumulations of seventy years; it is hoped that a detailed account of the "House of the Wheel Mosaic" will presently appear in print.[5]

The American excavators in the Athenian Agora have also recently uncovered (May 1971) on the north slope of the Areopagus, buried under a house of the Roman period, a few tattered remnants of another Classical Greek house with a rather small andron. In the centre of the room was a not too well preserved pebble mosaic using red and yellow colours as well as black and white and having a design which included at least a dolphin and a sea-monster but apparently no human figures. Androns with the typical raised platform but with the central area of plain cement have turned up at several other places in Athens, such as in the valley between the Hill of the Nymphs and the Areopagus, on the Pnyx Hill, and in northwest and southeast Athens.[6] These too indicate the existence of houses of considerable quality distributed widely throughout the city.

Yet by the late fifth and fourth centuries B.C. there must have been far finer houses in Athens than any of those we have just mentioned, for we hear in our ancient literary sources something of the mansions in which lived wealthy Athenians like Callias or Alcibiades or Lysias' brother, Polemarchus, the first the scene of Plato's *Protagoras*, the last (in the Piraeus) that of the *Republic*. And when in the fourth century

[4]The mosaic is briefly mentioned in *AthMitt* 19 (1894) 508, and see *Olyn.* 8, 180.

[5]Meanwhile see Thompson and Wycherley (above, note 1) 180–182.

[6]On the rocky hillsides of southwest Athens traces of many houses, probably mostly of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., are still to be seen. In many places floors, lower walls, and steps have been cut out of the living rock, and with a little cleaning it probably would be possible to make out at least the partial plans of a number of houses. Even without such cleaning a German couple have recently been able to suggest the plans of several houses in the area of the Pnyx and the Hill of the Nymphs which seem to follow a simple general pattern which they term *Flügelhofhäuser*, a type not yet observed elsewhere (Heide Lauter-Bufe and Hans Lauter, "Wohnhäuser und Stadtviertel des klassischen Athen," *AthMitt* 86 [1971] 109–124). One such house even contains the remains of an andron with raised platform for the couches. The area of the perhaps six rooms of the ground floor of these houses is considerable, as much perhaps as 200 sq. m., an area not far short of that of the normal Olynthian houses. For other androns in Athens see the following note. For the house on the N. slope of the Areopagus see now *Hesperia* 42 (1973) 146–156 (andron 152 f.).

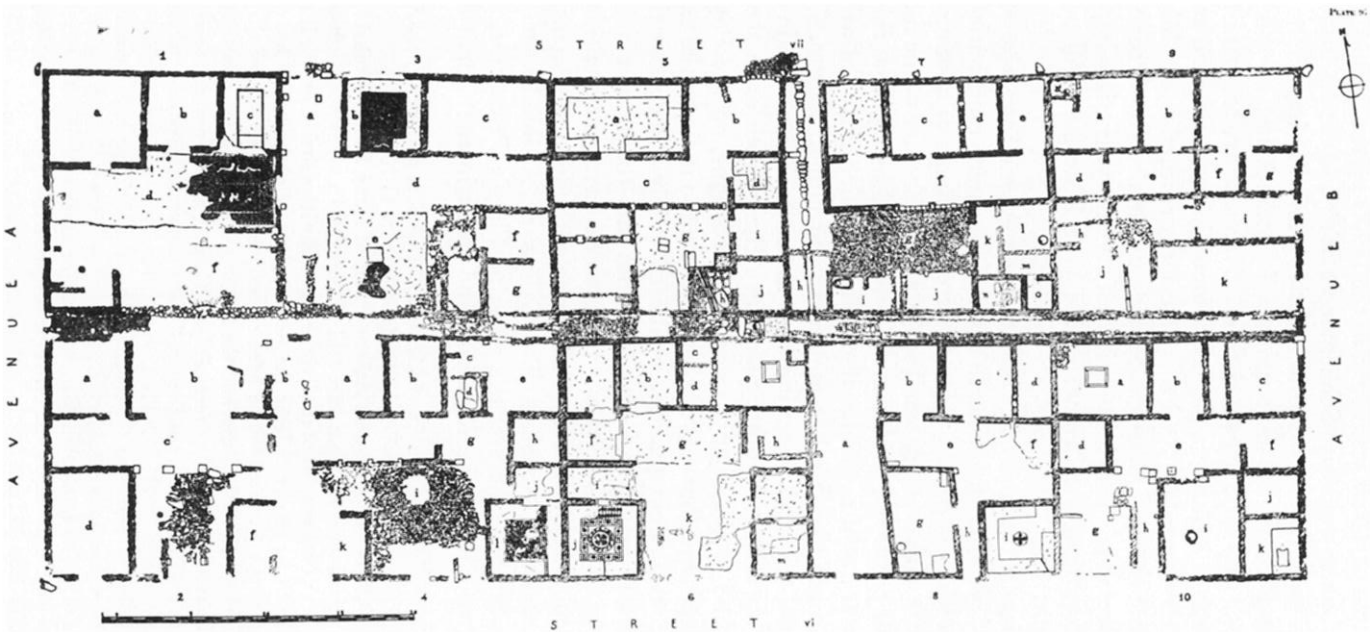

Fig. 1. Plan of Block A vi, Olynthus

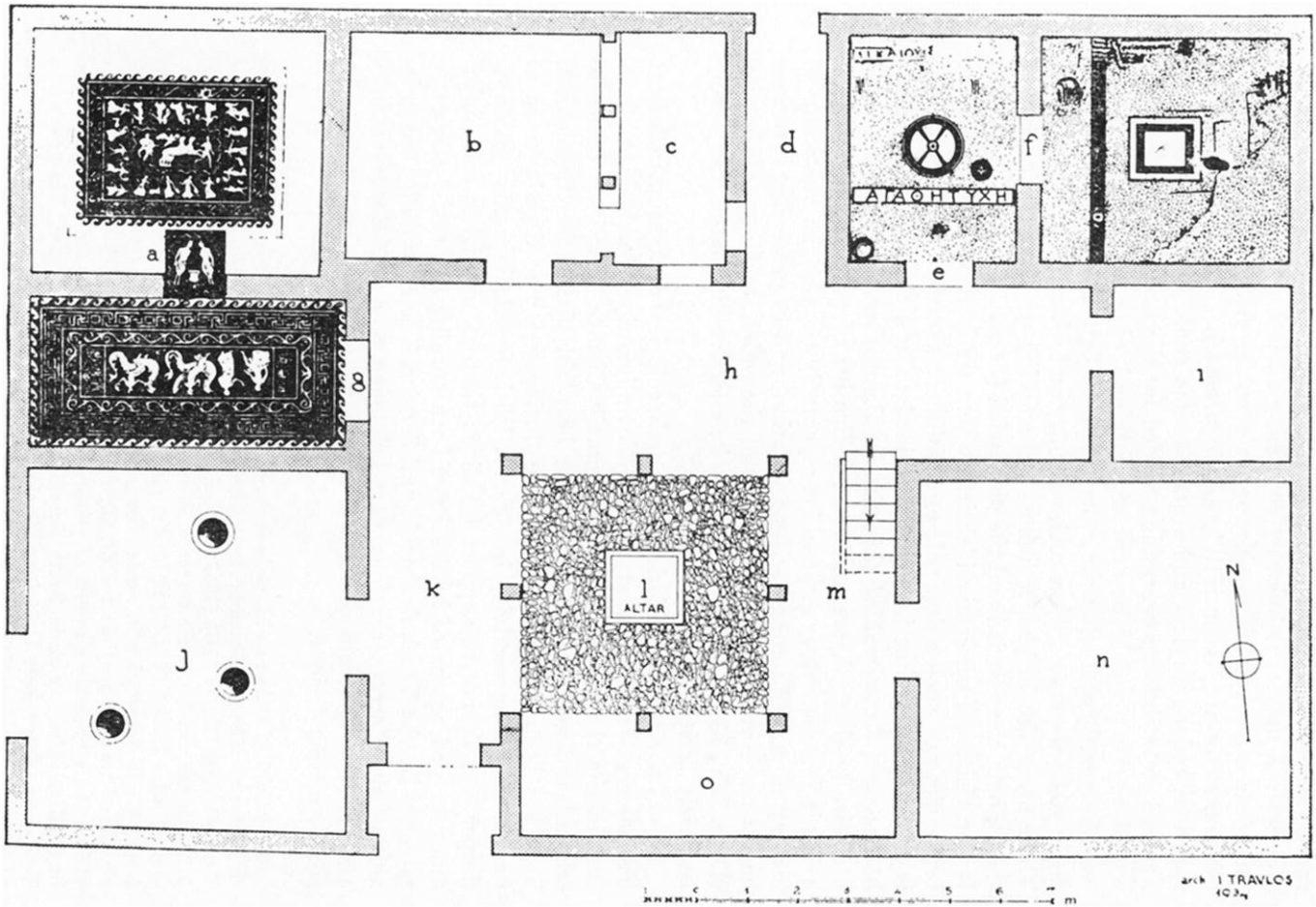

Fig. 2. Restored plan of Villa of Good Fortune, Olynthus

conservatives like Xenophon decry paintings and decoration in domestic architecture they are obviously swimming against the stream. Even in the house of Ischomachus—Xenophon's model Athenian gentleman—the *diaiteteria* are "beautified" (*kekallopismena*). Elaborate precautions ensure abundant service- and storage-rooms conveniently designed and situated so as to keep everything needed for the household with proper regard to what should be kept together and what separate, what was used frequently and what not, what required light and what dark, what ought to be warm and what cool, what dry and what damp, and so forth. There must also be proper living- and working-space for the numerous slaves, both the married and the unmarried (*Mem.* 3.8.8-10; *Oec.* 9.2-10). If our visitor of uncertain identity, whom we have referred to at the beginning, saw such a domestic establishment as that of Ischomachus it is not surprising that he felt constrained to add that a few Athenian houses were "serviceable" (*chresimai*). Demosthenes' remarks, though rhetorically charged, are still more indicative of good, even of "high" living in fourth-century Athens. He repeatedly accuses the politicians of his day of corruption and self-gratification, and of possessing luxurious homes more magnificent than many of the public buildings of the city (Dem. 3.29, 23.208). For his point to be effective his charges can hardly be purely fictitious.

As we have already said, deliberate archaeological excavation in Athens has not revealed much that would indicate luxurious domestic architecture in the classical city, but fortunately Chance sometimes comes to our aid and achieves more than the best-laid plans of archaeologists. This has been particularly the case during the past decade or so of phrenetic building-activity in Athens. With foundations that go down deeper and deeper to support buildings that go up higher and higher many ragged scraps of houses have been turning up, to be efficiently salvaged by the Greek Archaeological Service. The most easily recognizable of these scraps are fragments belonging to a half dozen or more andron floors of plain cement[7] or occasionally, as we have seen, with simple mosaic designs.

[7]Fragments of androns with plain cement floors have turned up in the Agora excavations near the Theseion Square (unpublished); at 17 Amphiktyon St., a little west of the Hephaesteum, *Deltion* 22B1 (1967) 51 f., fig. 12; on the Pnyx Hill, *Hesperia* 12 (1943) 312, 333, and fig. 25; at the corner of Asomata and Tournavitos Sts near the Dipylon Gate, *Deltion* 23B1 (1968) 43; at 13 Virginia Benaki St., near the Dipylon, *Deltion* 23B1 (1968) 43; on Keratsinios St. west of the preceding, *Deltion* 22B1 (1967) 88, fig. 41; and at 3 Bourbaches St. southwest of the Olympieum, *Deltion* 24B1 (1969) 28, fig. 4. These androns were probably all parts of private houses, but androns are sometimes found in public buildings, e.g., in South Stoa I in the Athenian Agora, Thompson and Wycherley (above, note 1) 76 f., and in the Pompeion at the Dipylon, the latter with remains of a pebble mosaic floor, *Deltion* 17B (1961) 17, pl. 15.

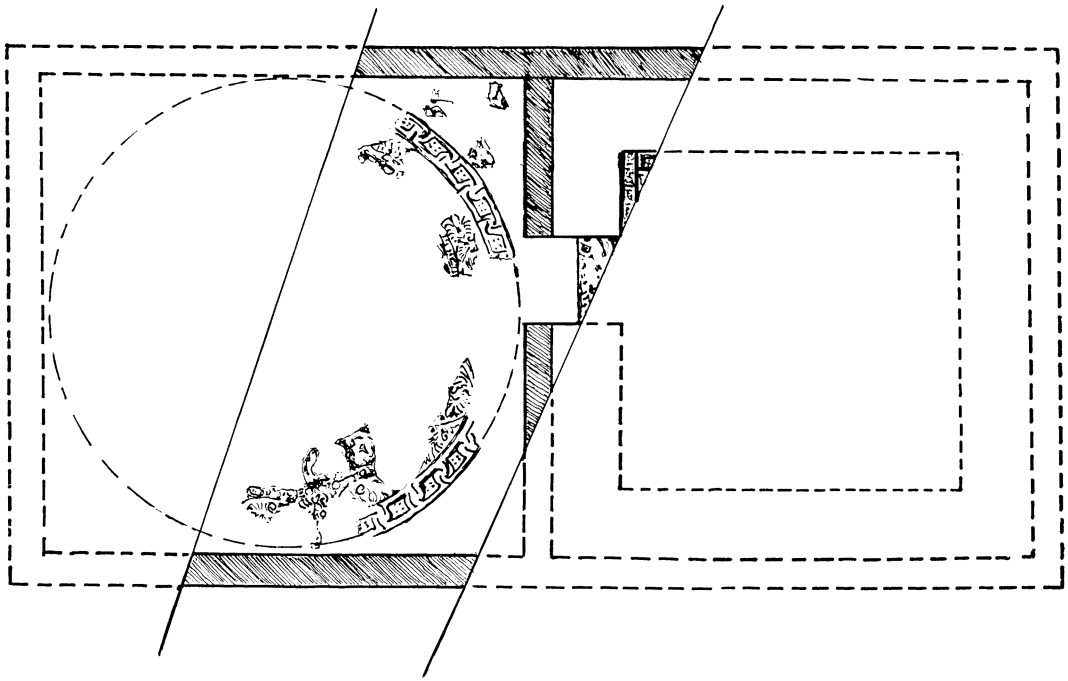

FIG. 3. RESTORED PLAN OF ANDRON AND ANTEROOM IN HOUSE ON MENANDER ST., ATHENS

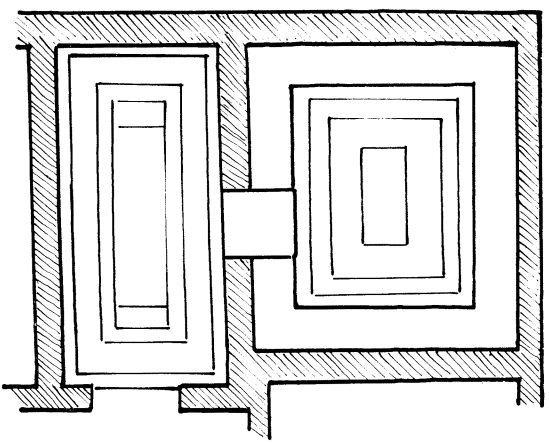

FIG. 4. PLAN OF ANDRON AND ANTEROOM IN VILLA OF GOOD FORTUNE, OLYNTHUS, AT SAME SCALE AS FIG. 3

Pl. 1a. Dionysus Mosaic in Villa of Good Fortune, Olynthus

Pl. 1b. Achilles Mosaic in Villa of Good Fortune, Olynthus

Pl. 2a. Mosaic in andron of house on Menander St., Athens

Pl. 2b. Mosaic in anteroom of house on Menander St., Athens

Pl. 2c. Mosaic in entry-panel of andron of Villa of Good Fortune, Olynthus

Pl. 2d. Mosaic in andron of house A vi 3, Olynthus

But all these accidental discoveries were eclipsed by one made in the autumn of 1966 in the course of excavating for the foundations of a new six-storey building in a block bounded by modern streets bearing the good classical names of Menander, Euripides, and Sappho. The capable Greek ephor, Miss Olga Alexandri, immediately took over supervision of the excavation and from her promptly published account the following details are drawn;[8] it is also through her kindness and that of Professor Marinatos that the pebble mosaics illustrated here are reproduced (Pl. 2ab). Although the excavations were necessarily confined to the width of the lot, a strip barely fifteen feet wide, the fragmentary remains, recognizable as forming parts of two rooms, have a good deal to tell us (Fig. 3).

About half of the floor of one room was exposed in the narrow trench, and as the pattern of its pebble mosaic was circular it is easy to estimate that the room had been about thirty feet square. The only doorway to the room that is definitely preserved is on the north side. This opened into a room which can be easily identified as an andron from the fragment of raised cement platform preserved just within the door. Obviously this room was the same width as its anteroom and it is unlikely to have been shorter; since androns were frequently square, however, it may have been no longer.

The thirty-foot circle of the anteroom (Pl. 2b) was bordered by meander, palmette, and bead-and-reel patterns (the last has not been found in Olynthian mosaics), but except for traces of griffins at the circumference the circular design itself is completely missing. The triangular corners of the room, outside the circle, probably each contained a pair of griffins heraldically confronted (only one corner is actually preserved).

The entry-panel at the door to the andron was filled with a scene of two griffins attacking a stag (Pl. 2a), a representation which finds a very close parallel, both in composition and in style, in the entry-panel to the andron of one of the houses on the North Hill at Olynthus, House A vi 3 (Pl. 2d). Of the mosaic in the central part of the floor of the Athenian andron only a few feet of the rectangular meander border is visible, a type of meander also exactly paralleled, if we allow for the colours being reversed, at Olynthus in the andron of House A vi 6, that is in the same block as House A vi 3 (*Olyn.* 5, Pl. 14b).

It would of course be more than risky to assume on the basis of the resemblance between the entry-panels that the scenes in the main part of the floors of the androns of House A vi 3 and of the house on Menander St. in Athens were also the same, but we can at least feel quite sure that,

[8] *Deltion* 22B1 (1967) 19, 98–100, fig. 47, pls. 91 f.; briefly reported in *AJA* 71 (1967) 295 as "a villa of the third century B.C."

fine as is the representation of Bellerophon on Pegasus killing the Chimaera on the Olynthian mosaic (Pl. 2d), the scene and style of the missing mosaic in the andron of the Athenian house would have been no less excellent.

In attempting to gain an idea of the quality of the better houses in fifth- and fourth-century Athens by using the better preserved houses at Olynthus as a touchstone we must bear in mind that such an extensive sampling of the housing-districts of Olynthus has been made (some hundred house-plans are known) that we can feel sure that the Villa of Good Fortune represents one of the finest, if not actually the finest, house ever built in that town; on the contrary we know the houses of Athens of the classical Greek period from so few and from such fragmentary examples that there is no good reason at all why we should consider the remains at 9 Menander St. as representing one of the finest Athenian houses of its day—there may have been far finer. Much the same can be said regarding the quality of the mosaics in the two cities.

As for wall decoration, almost nothing can be said of its use in Athenian houses of the period we are discussing, on the basis of actual remains. At Olynthus, in the Villa of Good Fortune—as fairly commonly among the better houses at that site—there was a white dado a foot or so high marked off by incised lines in such a way as to suggest courses of stone blocks; the upper wall was given a fine, glossy "Pompeian" red colour, without, it seems, any pattern or figure decoration.[9] In Athens, as early as the fifth century B.C. the interior walls of some public buildings were adorned with elaborate figure compositions of mythical or historical subjects by such outstanding artists as Polygnotus and Micon, and it is clear that this practice was not unknown in private houses, as we learn from the anecdote that Alcibiades had his walls decorated by Agatharchus, whom he shut up in his house until the work was completed (Plut. *Alc.* 16; Andoc. 4.17). In the fourth century Xenophon refers to the practice of having paintings in private houses as evidently not unusual (*Mem.* 3.8.10).

The superior pretensions of the andron-anteroom complex in the house at 9 Menander St. compared to the one in the Villa of Good Fortune become apparent when we note their relative size, for the andron of the former was at least three times as large as that of the latter, while the anteroom was about five times as large, as can be readily seen from Figs. 3 and 4, where their plans are drawn to the same scale.

But what of the size of the Menander St. house as a whole? With only the andron-anteroom complex to judge by it is obviously difficult to say. If, however, as is possible or even probable, this pair of rooms at 9 Menan-

[9] *Olyn.* 8, 295, fig. 30. "Faint traces of garlands rendered in red against a white background were found on one wall" of an andron in House B i 5, *Olyn.* 8, 301; *Olyn.* 2, 109.

der St. was related to the rest of the house as were the rooms *ag* in the Villa at Olynthus, that is, set in the north-west corner of the house (their orientation is appropriate to this) and opening east on the north portico (*pastas*) through a door at the east end of the anteroom, then the north-south width of the Athenian house may have been as great as one hundred and twenty feet, a figure only a little less than that of the vast mansions recently excavated by Photios Petsas at Pella, the Macedonian capital of Philip and Alexander the Great.[10]

Unfortunately it will probably never be possible to determine either the plan or the dimensions of the house at 9 Menander St. from actual remains. Almost the entire andron floor is hidden beneath a six-storey building constructed in 1936, and though its mosaic lay nearly thirteen feet below the surface of the adjacent street it was probably completely destroyed in the process of excavating the cellar for that building; I have been unable to discover any record of the finding of mosaic fragments at that time.

The area over the southern half of the anteroom was occupied until recently by a two-storey structure which has now been razed to the ground-level and is, for the time being, in use as a parking-lot. There is thus some possibility of recovering more of the design of the circular mosaic in the centre of the anteroom if and when the lot is redeveloped and excavated for a new deep cellar.

But even what we now know from the remains of the house at 9 Menander St., from fragments of other houses, and from remarks of classical writers, is sufficient to make it clear that houses of fine quality did exist in late fifth- and early fourth-century Athens. The exact date of the house newly found on Menander St. is hard to fix. The similarity of its mosaics to those of the Villa of Good Fortune suggests that the two houses are nearly contemporaneous, and the date of the Olynthian house, to judge by certain features of its mosaics (which were presumably part of the original house), could not have very long preceded the destruction of the city in 348 B.C. by Philip of Macedon.[11]

[10] *Deltion* 16A (1960) 72–83; *BCH* 86 (1962) 805–813.

[11] The shape and proportions of the calyx-crater in the entry-panel (Pl. 2c) suggested to Robinson (*Olyn.* 5. 357) a date in the last quarter of the fifth century B.C., but he cited no evidence in support of such an early date, and Martin Robertson declares that its "form shows this must be well on in the fourth century" (*JHS* 85 [1965] 74). A comparison with red-figure calyx-craters of the second and third quarters of the fourth century illustrated and approximately dated in A. D. Trendall, *The Red-figured Vases of Lucania, Campania, and Sicily 1–2* (Oxford 1967), especially those of the "Horseman Group" of the "Cumae A" stage, e.g., pl. 195.6, 7, and with the calyx-craters represented by Karl Schefold, *Untersuchungen zu den Kertscher Vasen* (Berlin 1934), chronological table, p. 139, clearly shows that the mosaics of the Villa of Good Fortune cannot far precede the destruction of the city in 348 B.C. This conclusion can be reinforced by a comparison of various

It would be an odd twist of circumstance if this house at 9 Menander St., the finest Athenian house-fragment yet known to us from the Classical Greek period, should have been built by one of those fourth century politicians whom Demosthenes berated so soundly in his *Olynthiacs* for selling out their city to Philip, the destroyer of Olynthus, in order that they themselves might live in splendour and comfort.

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distinctive details which occur on both mosaics and vases. For example, the treatment of the rock on which Achilles sits (Pl. 1b) finds a close parallel in the work of the so-called "Spotted-rock" group of painters of the mid- and late-fourth century; cf. Trendall, *op. cit.* 234–245, pls. 92 f., 121. The white discs or flowers beside the apices of the palmettes of the Achilles Mosaic also appear in the same position on South Italian pottery of the same period, *ibid.* pls. 31.1, 62.6, 77.1, 2, etc.