CONCLUSION

Inscriptions were a particular genre of writing: they were public, and the content was highly selective. Among all of the extant inscriptions related to the centonarii, 46 were honorific tituli set up by the collegia themselves; five were metal tablets presented to the patrons; 50 were epitaphs for members, out of which 22 were put up by the collegia. Over 100 other inscriptions were neither put up by the collegia nor by the members, but among them the collegium centonariorum was mentioned, in most cases, as a recipient of gifts, or client of a patron. Banquets, decent burials, wealth, and social connections: these subjects stand out in this corpus of epigraphic evidence. These are exactly the kinds of things by which these centonarii wanted the society at large to remember them. In the eyes of the public authorities, however, the value of the collegia centonariorum lied in their utilitas publica, public service(s). Neither the centonarii nor the legal texts about them bothered to explain in what way(s) they were considered to be of public use. Glaring holes like this permeate our sources. One can take the very cautious road by saying that anything that is not evidenced in the sources is not convincing in terms of the writing of history, even though it is consistent with historical plausibility. Or alternatively, one may follow an equally reasonable principle, that is, anything that is consistent with historical plausibility should not be ruled out until it is proven wrong. I have chosen to take the second route. What this book strives to provide is an exercise that pushed the available sources to their fuller, if not their fullest, potential. I do not claim that the reconstructions proposed in this book offer the last word on the origins and characters of the collegia centonariorum. But it represents an advancement from past treatment of the data in several ways. In particular, I have taken into full account the chronological, geographical and circumstantial factors—with due considerations of distortions caused by the imperfect state of our sources— that might have influenced the development and the character of the collegia centonariorum.

The first important point of this book is that the centonarii could be/are to be identified as artisans and tradesmen in low-to-medium quality woolen. The members of the collegia centonariorum were recruited on the basis of their trade, though this does not necessarily mean that every
single member was related to the textile economy. The production and consumption of textiles is the most important non-agrarian economic activity, after building. But textiles have remained a commodity “which has been prominent in the scholarship of the post-classical Mediterranean, but which has attracted few ancient historians.” Indeed, in the current discussions on the nature, scale, and structure of the Roman economy, unlike staples or pottery, the production, distribution and consumption of textile products have remained quite secondary. This was partly because the archaeological evidence was too fragmentary, and partly because the earlier studies of the textile economy in the Roman West depended heavily on the scattered anecdotal references to the artisans and tradesmen in textiles. The ‘rediscovery’ of the centonarii as textile craftsmen and tradesmen will have significant implications for understanding the Roman textile economy in particular, and the Roman economy in general. For scholars of socio-economic history, this dataset of the centonarii will not only substantially increase the visibility of urban craftsmen and tradesmen in textiles, but will also bring to the forefront the point that they did not operate in isolation from each other. It also helps us envisage a larger scale of urban-based production and trade of textiles in places where the collegia centonariorum are attested.

The collegia centonariorum certainly did not develop everywhere. In fact, their development in a given place is indicative of the importance of the mode of production based on urban workshops. In Gallia Belgica and Southern Italy, where estate-based productions took precedent, the guilds of textile craftsmen and tradesmen are hardly seen. Compared with the estate-centered mode of production, the urban-based, commercially oriented textile production may have had a more dynamic impact on all of the various levels and stages of the textile economy, from the acquisition of raw materials and production of various textile products, to the distribution of the finished products. In particular, the urban craftsmen and tradesmen in textiles would have had to depend on the rural areas for the supply of raw materials such as wool, and on a large number of scattered laborers for the semi-processed materials such as yarn and strings. Household self-sufficiency in textiles cannot have been farther from the reality. But more importantly, these urban craftsmen and tradesmen can be seen as active agents in constructing

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1 Horden and Purcell 2000: 351.