The funerary altar of the knife-maker Lucius Cornelius Atimetus provides one of our few direct glimpses into the dynamics of a Roman artisanal workshop. When Atimetus commissioned the altar in the middle of the first century AD, both on behalf of himself and on behalf of his former slave, Epaphra, he had it decorated with two reliefs. In one, Atimetus and another man—either Epaphra, or perhaps a client—stand beside a cabinet in which a small collection of the workshop’s products is on display. In the other, Atimetus and Epaphra are hard at work in the smithy. On the left side of this relief, a seated Atimetus holds a work-in-progress on the anvil with his left hand, and a small hammer in his right; across from him stands Epaphra, poised to deliver a strong blow to the piece in a spot to be indicated by a tap from Atimetus’ own hammer.1

Together, these reliefs evoke an image of an artisanal enterprise in which a proprietor relied heavily on the labour of a slave, who in this case ultimately earned his freedom. That image of a small slave-based firm finds enough echoes in other categories of evidence to suggest that it was a widespread feature of Rome’s artisan economy. Several other funerary inscriptions from Rome, for example, suggest that skilled artisans began their careers as slaves in workshops belonging to other craftsmen, as did the wheelwright Marcus Sergius Eutychus,2 even if they too ultimately earned their freedom. Equally instructive is a letter written in the late second century AD by a shopkeeper or artisan who may have worked in one of the Greek cities of Asia Minor. In the letter, preserved for posterity by the Roman lawyer Q. Cervidius Scaevola,3

1 Rome, Vatican Museums, Galleria Lapidaria, inv. 9277. Full discussion and bibliography can be found in Zimmer (1982: 180–182). For further discussion, see Clarke (2003: 121–123); and Kampen (1981: 97–98). The precise identities of the men depicted in the first panel are disputed: Zimmer prefers to interpret them as Atimetus and Epaphra; Clarke and Kampen, on the other hand, prefer to read the scene as a depiction of Atimetus making a sale to one of his clients. See also the contribution by Flohr in this volume (with a drawing of the reliefs).
2 CIL VI 9215.
3 Dig. 20.1.34.1.
the author pledged security in exchange for a loan; that security consisted not only of his shop, but also of the slaves who presumably worked within it.

In one sense, it is hardly surprising that artisans who lived and worked in a slave society relied extensively on the labour of enslaved workers. If nothing else, slaveholding itself was inherently satisfying in a world in which ‘owning slaves always served to express potestas in a society highly sensitive to gradations of status, esteem, and authority’. Yet, in another sense, the decision to acquire slave workers was not one that Roman artisans could undertake lightly, since the product markets in which they earned their livelihoods were affected strongly enough by seasonal and uncertain patterns of demand that it would have been risky for entrepreneurs to maintain costly assets—human or otherwise—if those assets were likely to be underemployed for extended periods of time. This was true even in a large and metropolitan consumer market like that of Rome itself, where seasonality and uncertainty ensured that demand for the products and services of most artisans was neither consistent nor entirely predictable during any given year. For those producers who made day-to-day goods and small luxuries, or who provided services for the average urban resident, uncertainty was mostly a product of agricultural variability: by driving up food prices, a bad harvest could depress the overall consumption of non-agricultural products among the bulk of the urban populace. For those who manufactured quality goods for the high-end segments of the market, on the other hand, uncertainty was largely a result of a tendency on the part of wealthy clients to order products that were at least partly customized to their own tastes; from the point of view of individual artisans, these kinds of purchases were always unpredictable. Seasonal patterns of consumption only added to these complications. In low-end markets, the purchasing power of many consumers varied over the year not just in response to cyclical changes in the price of grain (which tended to be low immediately after the harvest, and much higher near the end of the next growing season), but also in response to seasonal changes in the availability of certain kinds of work. Building work, for instance, took place between the beginning of April and the beginning of

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4 Bradley (1994: 10–30); the quotation itself can be found on p. 30.
5 I offer a more detailed discussion of this point in Hawkins (2012).
6 Erdkamp (2005: 143–167) offers an excellent overview of grain markets in preindustrial contexts.