Roman Workers and Their Workplaces: Some Archaeological Thoughts on the Organization of Workshop Labour in Ceramic Production

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The relationship between Roman archaeology and Roman history can be defined in terms of qualitative difference; an archaeology of objects vis-à-vis an history of texts. Yet certain topics lie at the shared border of text and material culture, and in so doing become suitable for an interdisciplinary approach. In the case of Roman work and workers, investigations of labour specialization, workplace structure, and production organization provide an example. Historians and archaeologists now find themselves posing similar questions concerning the nature and organization of labour in the Roman world, both in terms of its economic and social significance. Archaeology in particular has much to contribute, both because production activities are often reflected in an extensive—yet too often underappreciated—material record, and because recent research is drawing attention to the diverse ways that work and labour was organized throughout the Empire at different periods of its history. Crucially, this material evidence very often derives from industries only rarely or obliquely referenced in textual sources, and presents unique means to reconstruct how work was experienced in the Roman world through its spatial organization and temporal contextualization.

Considering this research potential and the context of this volume, this paper highlights current research themes in the archaeology of Roman workshops and proposes a new direction—drawing inspiration from developments in household archaeology—in order to re-evaluate Roman workshops and workers in terms of socialised workgroups. Evidence of Roman ceramic production sites from Gaul and Italy, which are especially well documented, will provide the primary case studies for the application of this approach.

1 Sauer (2004).
The Archaeology of Roman Workplaces

Archaeological investigations of workshops and workplaces have been motivated by a variety of different research interests. Yet some general trends can be discerned from the range of studies performed, and these trends provide an intellectual context for the argument developed in this chapter.

The identification of workshops as production centres of known types (particularly ceramic types) has been vital in refining typological chronologies, establishing the range of artefact types from the site, and indicating pointsources from which to build distribution maps (such mapping exercises utilise the production site as the central point from which distribution lines radiate). Production sites and their organization have also achieved prominence as, in part, a function of larger debates by archaeologists and historians regarding the nature and scale of the Roman economy. Accordingly, spatial dimensions of workplaces, range of product distribution, and type and scale of technology are argued to have wider relevance when assessing the scale and efficiency of Roman production.

Moving beyond purely economic approaches, workplaces have—more recently—begun to be investigated by archaeologists with more explicitly social questions in mind. Such studies encompass a wider variety of working contexts (including commercial shops, workshops, quarries, and storage depots), and have largely focused on reconstructing work activities in order to better understand the lived experience of labour in antiquity. Broader issues involve: the relationships among workers based on worker specialization and power relations; commercial and productive landscapes; and ideologies and dignitas of Roman occupations as expressed in the visual arts.

Growing concern over the social experience of ancient workplace environments mirrors discussions currently taking place in household archaeology which have implications for the study of Roman work. For instance, much in the way that the archaeology of crafts production has employed the ‘workshop’

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2 Clearly, the approaches outlined here do not exhaustively encompass all production studies of the Roman world, and this broad sketch to some extent glosses regional traditions in scholarship.

3 Biegert (2010).

4 Rostovtzeff (1957); Finley (1999); Fülle (2000; 1997); Greene (2007; 2003); Dark (1996); Wilson (2002b); Poblome (2004).

5 Flohr (2009); Robinson (2005).

6 Sekedat (2010); Delaine (2005); Graham (2005).

7 George (2006).