CHAPTER 8

Constructing Occupational Identities in the Roman World

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Perhaps the most complex issue in the history of work and labour in the Roman world is to understand how the everyday working lives of craftsmen impacted upon the way in which these people came to shape their occupational identities. While, in recent years, there has been a decent amount of literature on the way in which occupational identities played a role in (semi-)official public discourse in urban communities, particularly through professional associations, and while some have explored the way in which work and legal status interacted in shaping personal identities that were commemorated on funerary plaques and monuments, there can be no doubt that the most significant context in which occupational identities were negotiated actually was the shop floor and its direct urban environment.1 This is an environment that has been very hard to grasp for modern scholars: it is almost completely invisible in our textual sources, and any argument has to be constructed on the basis of generally badly preserved and often badly published remains of workshops identifiable in the archaeological record. In the large majority of cases, these material remains only reveal partial and indirect information about what was going on in workshops on an everyday basis, and the number of archaeological sites that has returned high-quality evidence for urban manufacturing and retail is exceptionally limited: outside the Vesuvian region and the metropolitan area of Rome and its port cities, only a limited number of production processes has been reliably identified, and the evidence is, besides a few exceptions, of much lower quality than the well-preserved workshops of Pompeii, Herculaneum, Ostia and Rome.

Yet this should not deter us: the spatial context within which people spend their working days conditions the impact, and thus, the meaning of formal labour relations, and plays a key role in the construction of social lives. Indeed, scholars discussing modern factories have emphasized how their spatial layout

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1 On professional associations see e.g. van Nijf (1997) and the chapters by Verboven and Liu. On epigraphic commemoration of craftsmen see esp. Treggiari (1975b; 1976; 1980); Josphel (1992).
could contribute to processes of social control.\textsuperscript{2} The spatial disposition of the work environment shapes the communicative landscape during working hours and has a decisive impact on the social effects of task allocation: where you work determines how and with whom you can most easily communicate.\textsuperscript{3} Spatial factors also determine the degree to which workers could publicly negotiate occupational identities with outsiders: it matters whether you are mending clothes in a small shop on a busy street, or in a large hall in a factory on an enclosed property, even if all other aspects of your working life—such as task, employment and civic status—are roughly equal.\textsuperscript{4} Indeed, one could question what, really, can be said of the everyday world of a worker on the basis of epigraphic information about occupation and legal status, or on the basis of brief references in literary texts written by authors who themselves were mostly proud not to know this world from inside.\textsuperscript{5} Tellingly, one of the most detailed descriptions of a workshop focuses not on the people, but rather on the sad life of the donkeys who were operating the flour mills.\textsuperscript{6} Without any detailed and reliable information about the place where somebody worked, it is very hard to grasp the socioeconomic meaning of the craft performed: its precise impact was to a considerable extent negotiated on and around the shop floor.

The aim of this chapter is therefore to discuss how the spatial organization and contextualization of shops and workshops in the Roman world conditioned the working lives of the people who spent their days on the shop floor, and how this relates to our view on the history of labour in the Roman world. A little bit of work has been done on this topic in recent years; the present author has discussed, to some length, the way in which the everyday working lives of fullones were conditioned by the spatial layout of fulling workshops in Ostia and Pompeii; Lauren Hackworth-Petersen and Sandra Joshel have to some extent further developed this approach in discussing how the material conditions of work places had an impact on the working lives of Roman slaves.\textsuperscript{7} The aim here is to discuss a more general model for the spatial

\textsuperscript{3} Cf. Newbery (2013: 24–26).
\textsuperscript{4} Cf. Mellor (2005: 51–55) on the spatial hierarchy in modern factories, where those doing the actual work were also the furthest removed from the entrance (‘backstage’), while business was done much closer to public space (‘front stage’).
\textsuperscript{6} Apul., Met. 9.11–14.
\textsuperscript{7} Flohr (2009; 2013); Joshel and Hackworth-Petersen (2014: esp. 118–161). See also Beavis (2015).