CHAPTER 13

Work, Identity and Self-Representation in the Roman Empire and the West-European Middle Ages: Different Interplays between the Social and the Cultural

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Social historians specializing in medieval and early modern Europe are fascinated by the funerary monuments and epitaphs constructed to commemorate the dead in public places both in ancient Rome and in many provinces of the Roman Empire.¹ They are intrigued less by the intrinsic artistic qualities than by the texts and especially the visual images, which often refer explicitly to the professional activity of the deceased. Some tombstones list only an occupation, while others also depict tools of the trade or even show the specific actions for which these instruments were used. During the Western Middle Ages before the fifteenth century, on the other hand, nobody set up texts or images in places accessible to the public that contained any reference to the occupation practised by an individual. Professional activities were no longer considered defining elements to be remembered by future generations. At first sight this seems remarkable since according to the standard historical accounts, in Classical Antiquity disdain for work and workers was deeply rooted among the elite, while it was the representatives of Christianity who stressed the value of work. How can the two elements of this grand narrative be reconciled with the changes in funerary representation? In this essay we shall argue that the answer lies in different interplays of the social and the cultural. Anybody in the Roman Empire who took pride in his professional achievements could include this in cultural expressions without encountering any serious objection, while in the Western Middle Ages public manifestations of occupational honour were rigidly bounded by ideological constraints.

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¹ See on this topic also the chapter by Tran in this volume.
The Roman Empire: Social Change and Building Occupational Identity

Although we are now well into the twenty-first century, historians stressing negative perceptions of work in Classical Antiquity still invoke the authority of Moses Finley: commercial and industrial activities were of only marginal significance, which meant that aristocratic standards and values remained dominant and therefore excluded appreciation of non-agrarian work. In the past twenty years the Finleyan model has undergone many adjustments, but the discussion has by no means subsided. Some authors continue to assert that the ancient economy was bounded by overriding social constraints. Other authors readily compare the economy of the Roman Empire in the period 100 BC–AD 200 to that of Western Europe between 1400 and 1700, focusing mainly on the similarities. Archaeological excavations reveal high levels of specialization and concurrent high levels of production and trade in the late Republic and the early Principate. Society was very dynamic. Members of the established elite increasingly seized the opportunities for profit that commercial expansion effectively provided for marketing the produce of their estates and—directly or indirectly—for participating in international trade. Still more importantly: epigraphic sources indicate the rise of economically active and successful middle groups, many of whom were organized in occupational associations. Irrespective of whether the concept of ‘middle class’, is applicable to the merchants, financiers, and master artisans who were economically successful, it is undeniable that the intermediary layers between the elite and popular masses expanded considerably. The social advancement of entrepreneurial freedmen is especially striking.

Put briefly, reasonable grounds are available for questioning whether non-agrarian work was indeed universally disdained in the late Republic and the early Empire. It would nonetheless be incorrect to assume that the foundations

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2 For recent critical assessments, see Andreau (2010); Scheidel (2012a); Verboven (2012c); and several contributions to this volume.
3 See, for example, Bang (2008).
4 See esp. Pleket (1990); Grantham (1999); Greene (2000); Temin (2006); Kessler and Temin (2007); Lo Cascio and Malanima (2009).
5 Veyne (2000).
6 Mayer (2012) argues that the commercialization of the Roman Empire led to the rise of a ‘middle class’ characterized by distinct patterns of economic behaviour and specific cultural values that set it apart from the established elite.
7 See esp. Scheidel (2006); Tran (2006); Verboven (2007b); Scheidel and Friesen (2009); Mouritsen (2011); Mayer (2012).