CHAPTER 8

Issues in the Study of Rural Craft Production in Roman Italy

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1 Introduction

The past two decades have seen the investigation of Roman craft products come into its own as a field of study, as evidenced by developments such as the establishment in 1995 of the Instrumentum working group, with its semi-annual Bulletin Instrumentum and monograph series Monographies Instrumentum,1 and the founding in 2007 of FACTA—A Journal of Roman Material Culture Studies, since reconstituted as HEROM—Journal on Hellenistic and Roman Material Culture.2 Particularly important was the launching in 2001 of CRAFTS—Structures, implantation, et rôle économique et position sociale de l’artisanat Antique en Italie et dans les Provinces occidentale de l’Empire Romain—a four-year project supported by the European Commission under the Culture 2000 initiative that involved regional studies of Roman craft production by research groups based in Germany, Austria, Belgium, Spain, France, Italy, Luxembourg, and Switzerland.3 In Italy, specifically, Sara Santoro directed the PAAR (Produzione Artigianale in Ambiente Rurale) research initiative under the aegis of CRAFTS. This involved a comprehensive survey of the published evidence for craft production in Gallia Cisalpina (in effect, northern Italy) during the Roman period, producing, among other things, VOLCANUS, a searchable database for internal project use,4 and a monograph of fundamental importance for the study of Roman-period craft production in Italy, Artigianato e produzione nella Cisalpina: Parte 1: Proposte di metodo e prime applicazioni.5

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1 http://www.instrumentum-europe.org/publications.html.
4 Santoro (2004a, 58–63).
5 Santoro (2004a).
2 Terminology and Definitions

We may begin this essay by defining what we mean by craft production. For this purpose it is useful to consider the definition put forward by Santoro:

L’artigianato è il processo di lavoro attraverso cui persone dotate di uno specifico saper fare e direttamente operanti sulle materie prime o su prodotti semifiniti le trasformano in oggetti manifatturati secondo schemi e progetti predefiniti e condivisi dalla comunità, destinati ad una diffusione verso l’esterno dell’ambito di produzione.6

It should be noted that both PAAR and the broader CRAFTS initiative chose to exclude from the realm of craft production operations connected with the processing of foodstuffs—though not, for example, substances such as unguents and perfumes—on the grounds that these activities should be more properly regarded as aspects of agriculture.7

While I am generally content to employ this definition,8 we might wish to make two modifications to it, the first fairly minor, the second of greater significance. First, we should admit to the realm of craft production operations concerned with the maintenance of craft products, such as the repair to a bronze vessel carried out by a tinker. Persons practicing these occupations have more in common with craftsmen than they do with other service providers, such as a tavern keeper or a veterinarian. Second, it seems to me questionable to exclude from craft production those operations connected with the construction, decoration, and maintenance of buildings. While it is not difficult to comprehend pragmatic reasons for excluding these operations from the realm of craft production, in that including them greatly expands and complicates any effort on the part of researchers to carry out a comprehensive study of craft production across a given region, it seems to me that they are an integral part of this kind of labour, differentiated from the realm recognized in Santoro’s definition principally by the fact that the end product is fixed, requiring the labourers to travel to the location of use or consumption in order to produce the object in question,

6 Santoro (2004b, 24). “Craft production is the process of labour whereby persons possessing specific skills work directly upon raw materials or semi-finished objects, transforming these into manufactured objects according to preconceived templates and aims shared by the community, with these objects intended for distribution beyond the context of production”.
7 Santoro (2004b, 24 and 35).
8 See Costin (2005, 1032–1034) for a definition of craft production articulated from the perspective of North American anthropological archaeology.