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Source: *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Oct., 1969), pp. 561-566

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#) and the [Society for the History of Technology](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3101576>

Accessed: 19/11/2013 01:40

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Research Note

THE MALE WEAVERS AT POMPEII

WALTER O. MOELLER

The authors of works on Roman private life and economics generally support the idea that the weaving of woolen cloth was primarily a part-time occupation of the housewife and her maids who produced for home consumption,¹ for there appears to be sufficient evidence, both literary and epigraphic, of household spinning and weaving by women.² Male weavers (*textores*), on the other hand, are considered to have been of little importance except as producers of luxury fabrics that required a high degree of expertise to manufacture. Although there are passing allusions to these craftsmen in the literature,³ there is an absence of references in the inscriptions to *collegia* (corporations or guilds) of weavers.⁴

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¹ H. Blümner, *Die römischen Privataltertümer, Handbuch der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, vol. 4, sec. 2, pt. 2 (Munich, 1911), p. 261; L. Friedlaender, *Roman Life and Manners under the Early Empire*, trans. L. A. Magnus and J. H. Freese (London, 1908–13), 1:229–30; J. Marquardt, *Das Privatleben der Römer, Handbuch der römischen Altertümer* (Leipzig, 1889), 7:517; G. Lafaye, "Fusus," *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines*, ed. Ch. Daremberg and E. Saglio (Paris, 1877–1919), 2:1427; V. Chapot in his articles "Textrinum," *Dictionnaire des antiquités*, 5:174–75, makes such a statement but then modifies it with the observation that in certain cases a household manufacture of cloth was impossible. T. Frank, *An Economic History of Rome*, 2d ed. (Baltimore, 1927), pp. 261 ff., sees at Pompeii a household manufacture of homespun by women that fed cloth to a highly organized finishing industry; in his *Rome and Italy of the Empire, An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome*, 2d ed. (Baltimore, 1959), 5:201 ff.; he repeats this interpretation of the nature of Pompeian cloth manufacture while adding that the reputation for fine cloth enjoyed by certain cities and areas of Roman Italy was probably based on the existence of slave-manned weaving factories.

² Catullus 64. 301–81; Columella 12.3.6; Livy 1. 57; Suetonius *Augustus* 73; Tibullus 1.3.83–89; *Digest* 33. 7. 16; *Corpus inscriptionum Latinarum* 6:11602 (hereafter cited as *CIL*).

³ Horace *Epistles* 1. 19. 13; Martial 12. 69. 6; Petronius 33; Plautus *Aulularia* 519.

⁴ Although *textores* are not mentioned in the inscriptions as having guilds, there are records of *collegia* of wool workers (*lanarii*, *lanarioi*, and *eriourgoi*): see J. P. Waltzing, *Étude sur les corporations professionnelles chez les Romains* (Louvain,

This is in sharp contrast to other wool processors who were organized in trade associations: carders (*carminatores*⁵), combers (*pectinari*⁶), dyers (*infectores*⁷ and *offectores*⁸), felters (*coactiliarii*⁹), and fullers (*fullores*¹⁰). Thus the impression that weaving was predominantly a feminine occupation is strengthened by an apparent lack of evidence of extensive masculine participation in the craft. If, however, we turn to Pompeii, which together with Herculaneum is still our best source for a knowledge of everyday Roman life, we find that the graffiti indicate the presence of many *textores*.¹¹

This evidence has been found in four places. The peristyle of one house (VII. iv. 57¹²) was certainly a *textrina* (an area devoted to spinning and weaving), since the graffiti indicate the locations of three looms together with the names of the weavers who serviced them: Eratus, Tiburtinus, and Crescens.¹³ Similarly, wall scribblings reveal that seven *textores*—Vebius Tamudianus, Felix, Ephebus, Xanthus, Successus, Faustus, and Florus—together with eleven female spinners worked in a *textrina* located in the peristyle of the house of M. Terentius Eudoxus (VII. viii. 5).¹⁴ Graffiti from the house of the Minuci (I. x. 8) also show that

1895–1900), 2:153; 4:95. It is not clear what these craftsmen did; perhaps they were weavers; see E. H. Brewster, *Roman Craftsmen and Tradesmen of the Early Empire* (Menasha, Wisconsin, 1917), p. 77. There were guilds of weavers in Egypt in Roman times, but this condition reflected Ptolemaic rather than Roman practices; see M. Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, revised by P. M. Frazer, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1957), 2:620, n. 44.

⁵ CIL 11:1031.

⁷ CIL 4:7812.

⁶ CIL 5:4501.

⁸ CIL 4:864.

⁹ CIL 4:7809, 7838.

¹⁰ CIL 4:7164, 9:5450, 10:813, 11:4771, 14:5473.

¹¹ Although the graffiti reveal much about the spinners and weavers of Pompeii, little information can be adduced about the kind of looms employed there, for, except for the ubiquitous loom weights, no looms or loom parts have been found. A very small horizontal loom, however, has been found and reconstructed at Herculaneum (see A. Maiuri, *Ercolano, i nuovi scavi* [Rome, 1959], 1:463, fig. 420). It appears that all we can say for certain is that the warp-weighted loom was in use at Pompeii for the weaving of large pieces of cloth. For an exhaustive study of the warp-weighted loom, see M. Hoffmann, *The Warp-weighted Loom, Studia Norvegica* (Oslo, 1964), vol. 14, especially chap. 5, pp. 297 ff., where the ancient warp-weighted loom is discussed.

¹² The excavators have divided Pompeii into nine regions, and in each region there are a number of blocks (*insulae*). In each *insula* the doors that give onto the streets are numbered consecutively. Thus the number VII. iv. 5–7 represents the “address” of the house located in the fourth *insula* of the seventh region at entrance fifty-seven.

¹³ CIL 4:1569–72.

¹⁴ CIL 4:1493, 1495–98, 1500, 1501, 1503–7, 1509, 1510; M. Della Corte, *Casa ed abitanti di Pompei*, 2d ed. (Rome, 1954), p. 98. The women were Vitalis, Florentina, Amaryllis, Iuanuaria, Heraclea, Maria, Lalage, Damalis, Servola, Baptis, and Doris.

five male weavers—Rarus, Rufus, Quietus, Onesimus, Primogenius—and two women were employed in a small room that served as a *textrina*.¹⁵ The names of two *textores*—Successus and Severus—were found on the wall of a tavern on the same block (I. x. 2); perhaps they also were workers in the House of the Minuci.¹⁶ In all, then, we can identify seventeen male weavers in the city; undoubtedly there were many more.

From the graffiti and the notices (*programmata*) that were painted on the walls, we know of the existence of other wool processors at Pompeii: dyers, fullers, and felters. As it was a Pompeian custom for individuals and groups to support favored candidates for public office in these *programmata*, the appearance of these craftsmen in them shows that some wool processors were active in community affairs and were organized in trade associations. Conversely, the absence of *textores* in these notices indicates that they were not active in the political life of the city and did not have a corporate identity. This is consonant with the lack of inscriptional evidence of weavers in the rest of the Roman world.

The official anonymity of the *textores* at Pompeii and elsewhere can be explained by their low social position and the attitude of Roman society toward them. Although the ability to spin and weave was highly regarded when found in the Roman housewife, the maids who engaged in these tasks as a full-time employment (*quasillariae* and *textrices*) were despised. Petronius 132 equates the spinner with the worst part of the household. Quite naturally the male weavers who worked with these women also were held in contempt. Martial 12. 59. 6 mentions them with loathing as being among the groups that had taken up the custom of greeting with a kiss and by whom one ran the risk of being kissed. Ammianus Marcellinus 14. 6. 17 classes the denizens of the *textrina* with the sooty slaves of the kitchen. Suetonius *De Grammaticis* 23, in reporting that the grammarian Q. Remmius Palaemon had in his youth been a slave weaver, qualifies his statement by adding “as they say” (*ut ferunt*), possibly indicating that he did not wish to be taken as the authority for ascribing such a base beginning to the man. Perhaps it was difficult for a Roman to believe that a grammarian could have had his roots in a *textrina*, since it appears that the language of the *textores* was exceedingly vulgar. Petronius 33, in characterizing the coarse speech of the boorish Trimalchio, says that he used up all the expressions of the male weavers: “*ille omnium textorum dicta . . . consumit*.”¹⁷ A reading of the obscene and insulting scribbles of the *textores* and their female companions at

¹⁵ CIL 4:8380, 8384, 8385, 8387, 8388; Della Corte, p. 251. The women were Salvilla and Gelaste.

¹⁶ CIL 4:8258, 8259; Della Corte, p. 251.

¹⁷ The manuscripts give variant readings of this passage; the reading quoted, however, seems to be the accepted one.

Pompeii provides a good sampling of these *dicta*. I include two that are merely insulting. In the house of the Minuci someone wrote of one of the *quasillariae*: “*contemno, derideo Latonam tuam Salvillam*”; “I despise, I deride Salvilla, your Latona.”¹⁸ And in the nearby tavern we have this interchange:

Successus textor amat coponiaes ancillam nomine Hiridem, quae quidem illum non curat. sed ille rogat illa comiseretur. scribit rivalis. vale!

Invidiose, quia [quin] rumperis! sectari noli formonsiorem et qui est homo pravissimus et bellus!

Dixi, scripsi; amas Hiridem, quae te non curat! Severus Successo: ut scripsi ita res se habet: Severus.

Successus the weaver loves the innkeeper's maid by the name of Iris, who indeed doesn't care for him. But he asks her to take pity on him. A rival writes this. Goodbye!

Oh jealous one, because you burst! [why don't you burst!] Don't bother a more handsome man and a man who is most wicked and beautiful!

I said it, I wrote it; you love Iris, who doesn't care for you! Severus to Successus: as I wrote it, that's the way it is: Severus.¹⁹

The first of these graffiti is written in Greek letters, and another graffito, also scribbled in Greek characters, contains the Greek word of greeting *chaire*.²⁰ Many of the names of the weavers and their women are Greek names or Latin slave names. Two from the house of Eudoxus are Jewish: Vebius Tamudianus and Maria.²¹ Evidently Jewish slaves were in the city at the time of the eruption of Vesuvius in A.D. 79 and they may have been there as a result of the Jewish war. The presence of a Jewish weaver reinforces the picture that I have been presenting, for the Talmudic tradition is clear on the position of the male weaver: He was considered to be a very lowly member of society who was morally unsound, probably as a result of his close contact with women.²²

In the Empire the authorities were careful about allowing guilds and private associations to form and operate. By a law passed in the reign of

¹⁸ CIL 4:8384.

¹⁹ CIL 4:8258, 8259; Della Corte, p. 243.

²⁰ CIL 4:8381.

²¹ CIL 4:1483, 1495, 1496, 1507; Della Corte, p. 98.

²² R. J. Forbes, *Studies of Ancient Technology*, 2d ed. (Leiden, 1964), 4:234; *Eduyoth*, trans. M. H. Segal, in *The Babylonian Talmud*, ed. I. Epstein (London, 1935), p. 2, n. 11; *Kiddushin*, trans. H. Freedman, in *The Babylonian Talmud* (London, 1936), pp. 422, 424. The citation from *Kiddushin* does not mention weavers specifically but, as carders and wool dressers are given as examples of men who were engaged in tasks closely connected with women, it is logical to assume that weavers were in this category.

Augustus, the *lex Iulia de collegiis*, it seems that *collegia* had to have imperial or senatorial sanction in order to function;²³ permission was more or less freely granted, depending on the policy of the reigning emperor, and the criterion used in granting it appears to have been the usefulness of the individual association to the state. In a well-known passage, Tacitus²⁴ reports that the associations formed at Pompeii in contravention of the law were abolished as a result of the riot of A.D. 59. This causes us some difficulty, since there is the evidence of the *programmata* for collegiate activity and organization at Pompeii. How could *collegia* have operated openly, which they most certainly did, if they were banished by law?

The Belgian scholar J. P. Waltzing²⁵ solves the dilemma to his satisfaction by postulating that these organizations functioned in defiance of the law. Rostovtzeff,²⁶ on the other hand, disagrees with Waltzing's contention that only associations with specific permission operated legally; he believes, instead, that all through Roman history *collegia* that were useful to the state existed either with the formal approval of the government or, if not explicitly sanctioned, with official toleration. A recent student of the matter, F. M. De Robertis,²⁷ holds that the Lex Julia never affected all trade associations and that by the middle of the first century A.D. most *collegia* were held to be legal. Whatever the explanation, the important fact for my analysis is that some groups at Pompeii had a corporate existence whereas others were prohibited from organizing. The *textores* must have been in the latter category. Despised and servile as they were, the male weavers were not the types that would have been encouraged to organize themselves, and, if they ever did so, they were not in a position to leave epigraphic records of their collegial life.²⁸ As they were engaged in a craft that was basically a feminine occupation, the male weavers were probably considered to be effeminate and may have been subjected to some of the restrictions that were placed on women.

²³ For a short survey of the *collegia*, see H. J. Rose, "Roman Clubs," *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford, 1957), p. 205.

²⁴ *Annals* 14. 17.

²⁵ Vol. 1, pp. 169-70.

²⁶ Vol. 2, p. 607, n. 22.

²⁷ *Il fenomeno associativo nel mondo romano* (Naples, 1955), pp. 36 and 37, n. 4.

²⁸ There is one inscription from Rome that mentions a *textor* who must have been a chief weaver in a large household where, as a master craftsman of an extensive operation, he held a high position: *CIL* 6:9290; cf. the *lanipendii* (overseers or foremen of spinners) and the *lanarii* mentioned in other inscriptions from the great households of Rome: *CIL* 6:3976, 3977, 6300, 8870, 9490-95.

A graffito from the *textrina* of Eudoxus contains a list of feminine names and next to the names the record of work accomplished in *pesa* (for *pensa*, the amounts of wool that were assigned to be spun) of *stamen* (warp) and of *trama* (weft) or of *subtemen* (weft).²⁹ These women were certainly spinners, and we have here a definite case of division of labor on the basis of sex: The women did the spinning and the men the weaving. As the men were certainly full-time workers, it is likely that the spinners were also so used. The fact that the Romans had special terms for spinners suggests specialization: *quasillaria* for spinner proper and *lanipendia* for supervisor of spinners. In a slave economy full-time employment in special tasks would have been possible, especially in large households. It is probable that the same arrangement existed in the *textrina* of the Minuci, where we have the names of two women, and in the house at VII. iv. 5–7, where there were three *textores*. Consequently we see in these three *textrinae* the conditions for small factories fulfilled, for there was both full-time employment and specialization of tasks, and we can assume that the production of cloth was greater than that required by the household.

It is well known that ancient Pompeii was a center of wool production and that this production transcended the bounds of self-sufficiency.³⁰ The electoral *programmata*, the combination wool exchange and guild-hall called the Building of Eumachia, and the many wool-washing plants and dyehouses attest to this. Yet the standard view of the nature of Pompeian spinning and weaving is held to even by those who see large-scale wool production in the city and in other parts of the Roman world.³¹ This appears to be a logical inconsistency, for spinning and weaving for home consumption could not have produced cloth for a market-oriented industry. Using the only evidence at hand, the graffiti, I have resolved the problem by demonstrating that in some Pompeian houses the manufacture of woollen cloth was developed beyond the stage of self-sufficiency. A secondary thrust of this study is to fit the *textores* into the Pompeian social structure and to explain why they were not organized as were the other wool processors: It was their completely servile condition and the feminine nature of their tasks that probably account for their lack of corporate identity.

²⁹ CIL 4:1507. The use of two different terms for weft may indicate different types for different materials or it may be that *subtemen* in this case was a secondary weft used simultaneously with the basic weft, *trama*. Unfortunately, there is no way to determine why two terms for weft appear in this graffito.

³⁰ Rostovtzeff, 2:577–78, n. 20; Frank, *Economic History*, pp. 261 f.; *Economic Survey*, pp. 201 f.

³¹ Frank, *Economic History*, pp. 261 ff.; *Economic Survey*, pp. 201 ff.