



RETHINKING WOMEN AND WORK

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Claire: Our evidence from the Roman world is dominated by the achievements of men. But what about Roman women? While we have numerous busts of Roman women, like this one, most of our evidence comes from funerary monuments. Although, these are idealised representations of Roman women.

Here we have a catalogue of inscriptions from Rome, including some female tombstones. So for example:

[quoting] *'Here lies Amymone, best and most beautiful wife of Marcus, wool worker, pious, chaste, frugal, faithful, and a stayer-at-home'.*

Roman law gave women no legal status. They could not vote or stand for office. And under the Republic and the early empire, women were controlled in legal matters by their male guardian. And yet we know that women were not confined to their houses and to their domestic chores.

Here in Ostia, the harbour town of Rome, trade and business was at the heart of the community. Funerary reliefs found here show women at work as midwives, as shoe sellers, as grocery sellers, as shopkeepers. But it's not always clear what these show. Are these really women at work? If so, are they slaves, freed slaves, or free born? Are they shop keepers or shop attendants?

In this relief from Ostia a woman sits doing the accounts in a butcher's shop. Her relationship to the butcher and her stake in the business is unclear. Although it has often been assumed that she is the butcher's wife. She wears the full dress and has the elaborate hairdo of an upper-class woman, but it seems she is a skilled and professional working woman.

I've come here to the University of Warwick to meet the Roman historian Dr Clare Rowan and learn more about women's roles in the world of work.

So Clare, beyond Ostia, what evidence do we have for working women?

Clare Rowan: So in Pompeii and Herculaneum there is actually a variety of epigraphic evidence that shows the roles that women could play, so we're talking inscriptions and graffiti. A woman named Umbricia Fortunata, for instance, was involved in a fish sauce

workshop. Another woman called Nigella was a public pig-keeper, and a woman named Faustilla actually acted as a pawnbroker. Women could also act as bakers, midwives, dancing girls, weavers, for instance.

Claire: And what about outside of the cities?

Clare: So in the countryside women could actually own farms if you were quite wealthy. So a woman named Terennia Tertia has actually, you know, owned farmland. Women might also have worked on farms, but it is very hard to reconstruct actually what's happening sort of in a lower class rural life.

Claire: And do we know anything about the economic role of wealthy women more generally?

Clare: Women could act as benefactresses, for example. In the city of Paestum, a woman named Mineia actually sponsored the rebuilding of the Basilica in the city. We have a coin that commemorates this. Wealthy women could also be involved in much more ambitious business plans.

Claire: The bricks that these buildings were constructed out of were manufactured at huge clayfields across the empire. When they were made, they were stamped with the name of the owner of the clay-field - you can just make out an example of one of these brick stamps here.

This stamp says "Domitia Lucilla Minor", and it was found in Portus, just down the road from Ostia.

Many bricks like this one have been found, suggesting that Domitia Lucilla had a big stake in the brick-business. Of course we mustn't imagine her making bricks herself! Rather, she was a member of a wealthy and powerful elite of women who were rich enough to invest large amounts of money, while still keeping their hands clean.

Women were less present in the world of work. Two major reasons for this are that firstly many women spent the majority of their lives pregnant, and secondly, women were active within the home. Inscriptions praising women for their wool-working should not lead us to conclude that this was just a hobby. In fact, many of the clothes people wore were produced in private homes by women.

The relative scarcity of evidence for women's working lives, should not lead us to conclude that it was exceptional for women to work or be involved in business. Clearly, the inscriptions that depict women as invisible and housebound tell us only a very small part of the picture of Roman women's lives.