

Hic situs est: occupational identity of Roman jewelers

Patricia Kret

Leiden University

patriciakret@hetnet.nl

ABSTRACT

In their grave inscriptions Roman jewelers – or their living relatives – mentioned their occupation and other aspects of their professional identity. Notably, they did not mention their skills. Craftsmen instead chose to show how successful they were in other ways: by stating the location of their workshop, supporting their former slaves as a *patronus* and being a member of/having a function in a *collegium*. They had to earn enough money to be able to erect this grave inscription. In this way they created an identity of individual financial success that fits the elite ideal of economic identity, thus providing social status.

Keywords

Craftsman, Roman, grave monuments, grave inscriptions, jewelers, *aurifex*, Roman Empire, identity.

INTRODUCTION

There is an ongoing debate in which different ‘models’ for interpreting occupational identity in Roman grave inscriptions have been developed. First, there is a model which sees the reference to an occupation as a way of showing personal financial success. Erecting a grave monument was expensive. By raising one, a craftsman could distinguish himself from his peers.¹ In the second model a craft is mentioned because of a feeling of solidarity within a household of (ex) slaves, a *collegium* or a workshop. Referring to occupation in the grave inscription could have a positive effect on the individual prestige of the owner of a household or workshop.² There are also authors who argue that the mentioning of an occupation was mostly done by freedmen, because of their marginal position. By naming their occupation they showed that they had a place in society. Their occupation gave them some prestige.³

In general, the authors in the debate focussed solely on the occupation. They rarely pay attention to the inscription in its entirety. However, this means pivotal questions have not been asked: which aspects of their occupation did craftsmen emphasize? How did they create an identity using their occupation? Also, the present debate focusses mostly on freedmen. However, freed, freeborn and enslaved worked together in the workshop and the models should be applied to all groups.⁴

By addressing these issues, a new contribution will be made to the debate. The question that will be answered

in this paper is: Why did Roman craftsmen use their occupation to create an identity?

Field of study

Craftsmen were not highly regarded by the social elite and many literary sources would provide a biased view.⁵ Therefore, literary sources have a limited role in this research. Grave inscriptions, on the other hand, were written by the craftsmen themselves and were also meant to be read by a large public. They showed the valued qualities and characteristics of the deceased.⁶ The public could deduct status by reading about different aspects of identity, such as birth, age, and occupation.⁷

There are regional differences in the created identity of craftsmen.⁸ Therefore this paper will concentrate only on the Italic Peninsula, from the Late Republic to the start of the Dominate. In the Late Republic the demand for luxury products grew, this changed the position of craftsmen. With the establishment of the Dominate in 284 AD craftsmen became less free in their actions. This may have changed the view on their occupation.⁹ As subjects for this research a group of craftsmen is chosen that is widely represented in the sources: men and women working with luxury products made from gold and gemstones, like goldsmiths and engravers: jewelers.¹⁰

THE INSCRIPTIONS

First the content of the inscriptions will be studied. How did jewelers want to be remembered? With which elements did they create their public identity in their grave inscriptions? For examples of inscriptions see the appendix.

Just a name and craft

Most occupational inscriptions only mention the occupation, name and sometimes age of the deceased. In the Roman world a name could contain a lot of information about someone’s identity. Identity as a slave, freedmen or freeborn was indicated by the name. Next to this information, jewelers mentioned their occupation. Thereby they made it part of their identity, created to show to others. It was a conscious choice to include occupation on the grave monument, since there are grave monuments that do not mention the occupation but show it on a relief.¹¹ Occupation was, then, of such importance that craftsmen chose to mention it, adding to their social status.

Location of the workshop

There are also inscriptions that mention the location of the workshop. Rents were very high in Rome. Owning a workshop meant being able to pay these rents – and thus financial success.¹² Whether the jewelers gained this success by commercial or artistic skills is untraceable. By

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showing the location of their workshop on their grave monuments and thus making it part of their public identity, craftsmen chose to show their professional status.

The locations mentioned differ.¹³ The most mentioned location is the *Sacra Via*, eighteen times in this research. The 'de *Sacra Via*' was the passage from the Palatine to the *Forum Romanum* used by the rich elite. Many workshops of luxury products were located there. The street is also mentioned by Ovid as a suitable place to buy gifts.¹⁴ Having a workshop on one of the most prominent streets of Rome must have been seen as a sign of economic status.

Interestingly, in inscriptions that only mention occupation of the deceased, usually a lot of relatives are also commemorated. In the inscriptions with a location not relatives, but freedmen are included. In most of the inscriptions only one of the deceased was a jeweler, and the rest were (very likely to be) his freedmen.¹⁵ Both naming relatives and naming freedmen can be interpreted as naming the people working in a workshop. A craftsman would probably get help from his wife and children. However, he could also buy or hire slaves, freedmen or freeborn.¹⁶ By designating not just the name, but both the freedmen and location of the workshop, the whole workshop is propagated. Not just the location and the ability to pay rent, but also the ability to support several slaves and later freedmen, shows the financial success of the craftsmen owning the workshop.

Employer

Third are inscriptions which mention an employer. Usually, the employer is the emperor. The imperial family had their own workshops. As far as can be traced, the inscriptions that mention being a slave (or freedman) of the emperor are found in imperial *columbaria*.¹⁷ Working for the most important man of the empire must have been a factor of social status.

There are no other employers mentioned by name. But there are inscriptions made by (freed)men for their *patronus*. The *patronus* is, in these cases, mentioned as a craftsman.¹⁸ Most probably his clients were his former slaves. As freedmen they stayed under his protection.¹⁹ Being a *patronus* would give status, for the person was able to support clients.²⁰ The inscriptions of this type were made for the *patronus*, so it was not his decision to name his occupation and being a *patronus*.

Being a member of/ having a function in a *collegium*

The fourth aspect of the occupation mentioned in grave inscriptions is being part of a *collegium*. A *collegium* was a club of men with the same occupation, religion, owner or another similarity. Everybody could become a member, but membership was restricted by income.²¹ The most important task of a *collegium* was to take care of the funerals of its members.²² *Collegia* were important status creating organisations for the people of low birth who could not have any influence in politics as an individual: however, his *collegium* could influence city politics.²³

The management structure of the *collegium* was comparable with state politics. The titles for different functions in a *collegium* were the same as the titles in politics.²⁴ According to S. Joshel, having an important function within a *collegium* (and mentioning it on your

grave monument) was comparable with 'the records of senatorial, equestrian, or municipal careers'. Both 'registered standing in the community'.²⁵ In short, being part of a *collegium* and especially having a function within a *collegium* was a great source of social status. Therefore, craftsmen chose to mention it on their grave monuments as part of their identity.

In some exceptional inscriptions there are craftsmen who even made huge donations to a *collegium*. Being a *patronus* of a *collegium* was a position with an higher social status, even in the eyes of the city council.²⁶ Inscribing your donation in such a way that it would be read by a large public, would show financial success. Even though the craftsmen that were a *patronus* of a *collegium* probably never had to do physical work, they still wrote what made them able to make donations, their occupation.²⁷

EXCEPTIONS, WHAT IS NOT WRITTEN

In the epigraphical material researched only two exceptional inscriptions have been found. CIL VI 9222 was set up by the *patronus* of Marcus Caneleius Zosimus. He wrote that his client was an engraver working with gold. He added that: 'As to skill', Zosimus: 'conquered all in the Clodian style of engraving'.²⁸ CIL VI 9437 was set up for a twelve-year-old slave by his owner. The latter wrote that the boy could create beautiful bracelets.²⁹ A reference to qualities, especially in comparison to others, is seldom seen in inscriptions of Roman craftsmen. These two inscriptions are the exceptions in this research.

On the basis of the research presented above, one could almost get the impression that jewelers, craftsmen, were not proud of their work and did not compete with their colleagues – but showed their professional identity in other ways. Although the written sources and material culture are scarce, there must still have been competition between living craftsmen.³⁰ Neurological science has proven that competitive behaviour is an evolutionary stable characteristic of the human brain.³¹ There are also some examples of advertisement found in the Roman world, like shop signs, facade decorations, shop windows and stamps.³² Competition and advertising must have been daily practise in the Roman world, but most of the researched craftsmen, left this aspect out of their grave inscriptions deliberately. It appears from the evidence that skills were not mentioned and would, thus, very likely have given less social status than the elements that were mentioned.

ANALYSIS: ELITE IDENTITY?

A grave inscription was carefully created for a big audience. The characteristics of a jeweler's occupation worth mentioning were (next to information like name and age): the location of the workshop, being a *patronus* and being a member of/having a function in a *collegium*. Exceptional are two inscriptions that refer to the skills of a particular craftsman.

Not everybody named his or her occupation, the craftsmen that did, used it almost like a title. With their occupation they created their identity. Craftsmen naming the location of their workshop showed that they could pay

the high rents, especially of a very prominent street. Craftsmen called *patronus* indirectly showed that they had a workshop and were able to support clients. By mentioning the membership of a *collegium* craftsmen showed that their income was high enough, especially when having an important function or being a *patronus* of a *collegium*. The identity that was created, was an identity of financial success. All the different aspects of the occupation that craftsmen mentioned, needed to be financed. How they reached this financial successful status is not mentioned in the inscriptions. Only two exceptions mention the skills of the craftsmen. Although we must assume that, to be successful, craftsmen must have had considerable skill – whether in craft or in commercial insight – this was normally not mentioned in the sources.

The identity created shows similarities with the ideas of the elite about craftsmen. Since, in the eyes of the elite, physical work was perverse and this is what is left out of the inscriptions. Being financially successful was more highly valued by the elite. The created identity on the grave inscriptions of these craftsmen seems to fit to the ideals of the elite.

Copying the elite?

Owning land and having a high income provided high social status to members of the elite. Craftsmen seem to create their economic identity in a similar way.³³ Also, inscribing particular functions in a *collegium* can be compared to the functions in a *cursus honorum* of the elite.³⁴ Much research has been conducted about the way freedmen copied the style of grave monuments from the elite. Freedmen created their presented identity by death in similar ways to the elite.³⁵ So, craftsmen could have copied or be at least inspired by the elite. There is, however, a difference in copying this identity for being status giving to the elite, or for having status under craftsmen as well.

If craftsmen copied the ways of presenting their identity that were normally used by the elite, they only copied an ideal. The economic identity of landowning is mostly substantiated with a writing of Cicero. However, Cicero's writing was meant to be moralizing and idealistic.³⁶ The social elite had to earn money, and certainly not all of them did this as landowners. The elite could invest in industry and commerce as well, but this was not mentioned in their grave inscriptions.³⁷ The economic identity created by the elite was an ideal and this ideal gave social status.

It is possible that craftsmen shared the economic ideal of the elite. A. Burford writes that in the workshop, slaves, freedmen and freeborn worked together, and had enjoyed the same education. So, it is quite possible that between craftsmen a distinction was made in education, skill or financial success and not in birth.³⁸ Besides this, all that was needed for a higher social standing, like a position in the city council, was money. With money a lifestyle could be maintained that could give social status.³⁹

CONCLUSION

In the section above the occupational identity of craftsmen, jewelers, as presented in grave inscriptions, was analysed. An identity of financial success was created and presented. This identity corresponds to the economic identity of the elite. The question that remains is: why did Roman

craftsmen use their occupation to create an economic identity with? Why did they want to be remembered for their individual financial success and not for their skills?

In the introduction three models for interpreting occupational inscriptions were introduced. In the first model craftsmen proudly showed their financial success to compete with colleagues. In the second model the occupation was mentioned to show solidarity. The third model argued that it were mostly freedmen who mentioned their occupation as a substitute status.

This research underlines the importance of the first model. Using their occupation, craftsmen created an identity of individual financial success. With this identity, that shows similarities with an elite economic identity, craftsmen placed themselves between their peers. It was this identity that showed how successful they were and that gave them social status in the end. With financial success one could climb the social ladder. This status was gained as an individual. It belonged to and was carried as a title by the one with an occupational reference, mostly the owner of the workshop.

However, model two also fits the researched inscriptions: most inscriptions were set up for more than one person. The identity of financial success belonged only to the one carrying the occupational title, but solidarity in the workshop was also shown. The craftsman decided not only to honour himself, his wife and children, but also – even more often – his slaves, freedmen or freeborn employers. This could still enhance his identity of financial success, since it means that the craftsman could support these people by life and honour by death. Evidence for the validity of the third model has not been found during this research, since it was income and not birth that gave these people their social status.

In short, Roman jewelers used their occupation and its aspects to present an individual identity of financial success. This identity gave them status among their peers, but also in general: financial success allowed craftsmen to climb the social ladder.

APPENDIX

This table serves as an example.

Table 1: Grave inscriptions of *aurifices*, goldsmiths, on the Italian peninsula from the end of the republic until 284 AD.

Only occupation (and non-occupational information)	CIL VI 9210, AE 1991: 106, CIL VI 9204, CIL VI 37779, CIL VI 9203, CIL VI 1982, CIL X 3976, Collatia p307, CIL V 2308, CIL V 8834, CIL VI 8741, CIL VI 37781, CIL VI 3946
Location	AE 1971: 43, CIL I 3005, CIL VI 9207, Urbs p85, CIL VI 77780, CIL VI 9736, CIL VI 9208, CIL XI 2619
Employer (named)	CIL VI 3951, CIL VI 4430, CIL VI 3950, CIL VI 3978
<i>Collegium</i>	CIL VI 9202, CIL VI 9149, CIL XI 4402

ROLE OF THE STUDENT

The subject of this bachelor thesis was proposed by the student, and was independently written - aided by feedback from the supervisor. Patricia Kret also created her own corpus of grave inscriptions, since there was none available, she had to seek inscriptions of jewelers and translate them to be able to study the created identity in the inscriptions.

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11. The only examples in this research are: CIL VI 9210 and CIL VI 9149.
12. Vennarucci, *A city of shops*, 90.
13. See Tabel 1, the mentioned locations in Table 1 are: Sacra Via, Porta Flumentana, de Aurelianis and A lacu Callines.
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15. For example: AE 1971 43, CIL I 3005, CIL VI 9208.
16. Treggiari, Lower class women, 76-78.
17. For Table 1 the first three inscriptions with a named employer are found in respectively the *columbarium* of Livia, Marcella and Livia.
18. CIL VI 9546, CIL X 3978, CIL VI 9138, CIL VI 9952.
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25. Joshel, *Work, identity*, 116-117.
26. Examples are: CIL VI 9144, CIL VI 1925. Verboven, The associative order, 22-24.
27. CIL V 785, AE 1981: 387, these men had high functions in a city council and still named their craft
28. CIL VI 9222 (p 3469, 3895); ILS 7695; D 07695, Joshel, *Work, Identity*, 58.
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