

The textile economy of Pompeii

Miko Flohr

A fiercely debated aspect of Pompeii's history is the nature of its textile economy. The large-scale excavations of the late 19th and early 20th c. led to the discovery of unusually large numbers of workshops, artefacts, iconographic representations and texts that point to the existence of a variety of textile crafts in the town, which stirred the imagination of several scholars. For most of the 20th c., Pompeii was seen as a centre of export-oriented textile production where wool was turned into finished textiles to be sold on the imperial market. The idea that Pompeii was a Roman version of a mediaeval 'textile town' was most elaborately discussed by W. Moeller in the 1960s and 1970s, but it would be attacked by primitivist scholars including M. I. Finley and, especially, his then-student W. Jongman.¹ While Finley and Jongman were able to expose some critical weaknesses in the arguments of those who championed the idea that Pompeii had an export-oriented textile industry, they failed to develop an alternative. As a consequence, there is no realistic framework through which one might make sense of Pompeii's textile economy.

The present article aims to present a new perspective. It begins with a brief summary of the 20th-c. debate and sketches how developments of the last decade have changed the field. Next, it re-assesses the evidence for textile crafts and trade at Pompeii. The evidence will then be used to rethink the functioning of Pompeii's textile economy of the third quarter of the 1st c. A.D., and to reconstruct the investment strategies of the entrepreneurs involved in it. Finally, I will consider the economic background against which these strategies evolved, and how Pompeii's textile economy may have functioned within local, regional and supra-regional networks of trade and exchange.

The history of Pompeii as a 'textile town'

Evidence for aspects of the textile economy has been noted since the early excavations. The first *fullonica* (VI 8, 20-21.2) was excavated in 1825-26 and immediately recognized for what it was. The building of Eumachia on the E side of the Forum, excavated in 1820, was (wrongly) interpreted as a clothing market as early as the 1860s.² However, the idea that Pompeii might have been a place where textiles were produced on a large scale does not seem to date back much further than the early 20th c., and must be seen as a result of the large-scale clearance that began in the 1860s and continued until the start of the First World War. The bulk of the evidence that has played a rôle in discussions about Pompeii's textile economy was brought to light in that half-century.

From Tenney Frank to Jongman

The first scholar to coin the idea that Pompeii was a textile town was Tenney Frank. In 1918 he published an article on its economic life in which he claimed that the town was

¹ Moeller 1976; Finley 1985; Jongman 1988.

² For the excavation and identification of *fullonica* VI 8, 20-21.2 see, e.g., Bechi 1827, Förster 1828, 207. Early identifications of the Building of Eumachia as a clothing market include Dyer 1869, 123; see also Mau 1892 (Moeller 1976, 64 is wrong to ascribe the idea to Mau 1908, 112-13). See also Breton 1855, 130, who sees it as the home of the *collegium* of the *fullones*. Fiorelli 1875, 260 considered it a big fullery.