

'It all comes out in the wash': Looking harder at the Roman *fullonica*

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In the Baths of Mithras at Ostia, a lead pipe from the public urinal carried fluids directly into a basement corridor which led to two small underground *fullonicae* (figs. 1-4).¹ As must have happened in towns and cities all over the Roman world, this product of human excretion was flushed down the urinal to re-emerge as the quintessential industrial cleansing agent. The Roman fuller has achieved notoriety for his exploitation of urine for washing woollen cloth. In this paper, I intend first to attempt a definition of fulling, and to show that the process of identifying and reconstructing a *fullonica* requires us to think harder about Roman cleansing processes. I will argue that the topic of cleanliness is so culturally loaded that it is very difficult to reach a neutral account of fulling. Literary discourse on these processes and their agents offers us a set of contrasting responses, most notably in interpretations of urine. I will examine the ways in which the Romans played with some of these paradoxes in a world of limited chemistry. From this, I will suggest a topographical model of water and waste in which the *fullonica* was a significant unit, and examine how the proverbial smells it generated raise interesting archaeological questions about location and urban space. A final section addresses the social profile of fullers and the cultural stereotypes attached to this profession.

What is fulling?

By "fulling" we tend to understand two distinct processes: one is the ancient equivalent of the commercial dry-cleaning of dirty clothes; the second is the industrial *finishing* of woollen products.

Textile historians usually suggest that the Roman *fullo* performed both rôles at the same time.² It is often said that clothes were fulled *de tela* and *ab usu*, formulae derived from Diocletian's *Edict of Maximum Prices* of A.D. 301.³ Both activities require similar cleaning products and similar processes for cleaning the textiles. Arguably, however, one is a commercial operation, the other industrial. The English fuller, the French *foulon*, and the German *Walker*, at least as far back as the Middle Ages, were industrial wool-finishers.⁴ The Roman *fullo*, if we believe our literary sources, was a commercial laundryman,⁵ and this seems to have been true of earlier Mediterranean cultures.⁶ "Fulling" appears to have remained a laundry service throughout and beyond Roman imperial history.⁷ Other largely neglected categories of textile-handlers, such as the *lanifricarii* or *lanilutores* — who play a rôle in W. Moeller's economic

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- 1 Nielsen and Schiøler 1980, 155 f. Urine may have been collected in an amphora placed under the outlet.
 - 2 *OCD* (3rd edn.) s.v. *Textile production*: "Wool cloth was taken direct from the loom to the fuller (*κναφεύς*, *fullo*) for cleaning and shrinking. He also acted as laundryman"; Bird 1993, 67: "the finishing of new wool cloth and the cleaning of used items"; Deniaux 1990, 63: "une double charge"; Hurst 1994, 92: "fullers could be the finishers of new cloth or laundrymen/cleaners."
 - 3 Moeller 1976, 18; Jongman 1988, 169; *Edict of Maximum Prices* (henceforth *Prices Edict*) c. 22; in fact, these formulae are used only of another textile worker, the *colorator* (c. 7.54-63); on the *colorator*, see Wild 1992, and below n.63. On the *Prices Edict*, see Corcoran 1996, 204-33.
 - 4 Cf. Singer *et al.* 1956, 214 ff., on cloth-finishing in the Middle Ages; Hall 1952; Scott 1931-32.
 - 5 The Greek *κναφεύς* or *κναφεύς* also performed the same function; cf. Ar., *Plut.* 166, ὁ δὲ κναφεύει γ', ὁ δὲ γε πλύνει κώδια ('one is a fuller, one a sheepskin washer'); Ar., *Vesp.* 1128 on the *κναφεύς* who cleaned soiled attire. Plin., *NH* 7.196, claims that *fullonia* was originally a Greek art.
 - 6 Robertson 1986, 16, who collates evidence from early Cyprus, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Babylon, Assyria, Homeric and Classical Greece, Palestine and Gaul.
 - 7 Ov., *Fast.* 3.821: *maculas laesis de uestibus aufers*; Isid., *Etym.* 16.2.7: *sordes corporum uestiumque lauantur*; Turnebus, *Adversaria* 29.27: *fullones eluere maculas solerant albarum uestium*; cf. Gell., *NA* 16.7.5: *elutriare lintea*.