'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). 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. It is often said that clothes were full’d de tela and ab usu, formulae derived from Diocletian’s Edict of Maximum Prices of A.D. 361. 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-fullers. The Roman fullo, if we believe our literary sources, was a commercial laundryman, and this seems to have been true of earlier Mediterranean cultures. “Fulling" appears to have remained a laundry service throughout and beyond Roman imperial history. Other largely neglected categories of textile-handlers, such as the lanificarii or lanilutores — who play a rôle in W. Moeller’s economic

1. Nielsen and Schðler 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 (γναφεύς, 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. 754-63); on the colorator, see Wild 1992, and below n.63. On the Prices Edict, see Corcoran 1996, 204-33.
5. The Greek γναφεύς or κοναφεύς also performed the same function; cf. Ar., Plut. 166, ó dè γναφεύς γ”; ó dè ài πλώνει κώδια (“one is a fuller, one a sheepskin washer”); Ar., Vesp. 1128 on the γναφεύς who cleaned soiled attire. Plin., NH 7.196, claims that fullonia was originally a Greek art.