

# The apple of discord: fleece-washing in Pompeii's textile economy. A response to M. Flohr

Nicolas Monteix

The study of textile production through the distorting prism that is Pompeii has suffered from nearly 40 years of debate between primitivists and modernists. By engaging in a re-appraisal of this topic, M. Flohr has proposed a model which, in many respects, offers new solutions and, potentially, a new vision of the Pompeian economy. However, the foundations upon which it builds are unstable: textile production itself — that is to say, the early stages of the *chaîne opératoire* for transforming wool into fabric — finds an all-too-diminished place in the discussion, in order to give a central rôle to the fullers. This reduced focus on the first production steps is brought about by two opposing processes: the disqualification of certain workshops, namely the so-called *officinae* “lanificariae”, and the over-qualification of evidence associated with weaving.

Without entering into a discussion on the merits of modeling, the following remarks aim essentially to respond to the arguments proposed by Flohr in attempting to discard certain workshops of the textile industry. First, it will be useful to clarify the basis of our arguments. At the risk of sounding too trite, it is worth recording that the interpretation of archaeological remains is based upon formal analogy: equipments that share an identical form are thus considered to have the same function. Yet even if Pompeii often provides examples of installations that corroborate certain structural types, observation of the standing remains alone is insufficient fully to understand their function; it is equally important to take advantage of the archival documentation made at the time of the excavations, even if this documentation is intrinsically incomplete. In order to facilitate the reader's comparison between Flohr's proposals and my own, I shall follow the order of his arguments.

## The so-called *officinae* “lanificariae”, “first generation” workshops for fleece-washing

A veritable apple of discord in the study of Pompeian textiles, the workshops improperly called “lanificariae” ever since the work by W. O. Moeller have split scholarly opinion.<sup>1</sup> Even so, I shall underline that accepting the explanation that identifies these spaces as installations for fleece-washing<sup>2</sup> does not necessarily mean having to follow Moeller's conclusions in their entirety.

These workshops appear in two mutually exclusive forms, the second being an evolved version of the first (see below).<sup>3</sup> The initial installation has three characteristic elements: a masonry work table laid out along one to three walls, with at least one furnace inserted in the table, and a basin to contain a liquid. The basin is equipped with an outlet, generally

- 
- 1 W. O. Moeller, “The ‘lanificarius’ and the ‘officinae lanificariae’ at Pompeii,” *Technology and Culture* 7 (1966) 493-96; id., *The wool trade of ancient Pompeii* (Leiden 1976) especially 29-35. *Contra*: W. Jongman, *The economy and society of Pompeii* (Amsterdam 1988) especially 167-68. On the inappropriateness of the term, see P. Borgard and M.-P. Puybaret, “Le travail de la laine au début de l'Empire: l'apport du modèle pompéien. Quels artisans? Quels équipements? Quelles techniques?,” in C. Alfaro Giner, J. P. Wild and B. Costa (edd.), *Purpureae vestes: actas del I Symposium int. sobre textiles y tintes del Mediterráneo en época romana* (València 2004) especially 51-52.
  - 2 Fleece-washing should be preferred to wool-scouring: the hairy coat of sheep and goats starts being wool only after its complete cleansing and the removal of grease.
  - 3 Borgard and Puybaret (supra n.1) especially 57-58.