

Introduction

Edmund Stewart, with contributions from Edward Harris
and David Lewis

This volume seeks to reassess ancient society and its economy through the study of skilled labour and professionalism. It is primarily a study of work in classical antiquity, yet one that attempts to broaden the subject beyond its usual parameters. It is not a book on agriculture or mining, a subject which would have easily occupied a central place in any traditional history of the ancient economy. It is not a study of artisans or urban crafts, though in what follows these individuals do make an appearance; nor does it concern traders or trade in goods. We are not even primarily concerned with slaves, though it was their work, in procuring for their owners both leisure and profit, that was often the hardest, most dangerous, and most demeaning of all. There is no shortage of publications on any of these subjects.¹ Instead, we are interested in those who aspired to win social status and material rewards through the practice of a skill or branch of knowledge and, moreover, those who succeeded in doing so, occasionally in spectacular fashion. We refer to these individuals throughout as ‘skilled workers’ or ‘professionals’.

Though each profession is distinct, all skilled workers share a common aim: to provide a service that (they believe) is of benefit to the public and for

¹ For a recent general survey of Greek and Roman work, in which work is generally understood to be manual labour and artisan crafts, see Lytle 2019. For recent general surveys of the ancient Greek economy, see Bresson 2016 and Harris, Lewis, and Woolmer 2016. On artisans in the Greek world, see Blondé and Muller 2000; Vidale 2002; Hasaki 2013; Sanidas 2013; Acton 2014. On Roman craftsmen, see especially Wilson and Flohr 2016; Verboven and Laes 2016; Hawkins 2016. On the producers of leather and textiles, see Dercy 2015 and Spantadaki 2016; on perfumiers, see Reger 2005; on skilled and specialized servile labour, see Rihll 2010 (on Greek slaves) and Bradley 1994: 58–65 (on Roman).

which they expect to be rewarded. Membership of a profession, or overall professional class, can form an important part of an individual's identity. In addition, professionals compete within a market, in which skill and knowledge is the prime commodity. Recognition as an expert in a worthwhile field has social value: it conveys status and may allow the practitioner to charge higher fees and improve his social position. To reap these not inconsiderable benefits, professionals must continually demonstrate their own expertise and the value of their art. It is our contention that to understand fully the literature and artworks that form the major part of the legacy of classical antiquity, we need to remember that they were created by professionals in just such a market for knowledge and skill.

This book considers a range of what we term here 'professions'. These are, principally, theatrical performers and musicians (Harris, Stewart, Aneziri), athletes (Mann), philosophers (Harris), doctors and seers (Harris and Massar), sculptors and architects (Harris, Massar, Hochscheid, Linder, Russell), and soldiers (Hodkinson and Lee). We have generally focused on practitioners of skills who, in some cases, achieved high status and wealth. This is not an exhaustive list but is intended to prompt further research in all these areas and more. We have deliberately adopted a broad chronological sweep from archaic Greece to the Roman empire. While we are not unaware of variations between distinct eras and regions, we would argue that this broad range of topics has the merit of revealing similarities and differences between the Greek and Roman worlds. We hope here to prompt a dialogue between scholars working on different periods and in different specialisms and to show how the economy of the Greek *polis* was not as different from that of the cities of the Roman empire as one might at first suppose.

Terminology

1 *Skilled Labour*

Both the Greeks and Romans were aware of the concept of skill, which in Greek is most commonly termed τέχνη, and in Latin *ars*. A skill was a defined and specialized branch of practical or theoretical knowledge with its own particular focus or function. To illustrate this point, let us consider just one example of a discussion of skill from Xenophon:

[Socrates:] "Tell me then, Critobulus, surely domestic economy [ἡ οἰκονομία] is a word for a kind of knowledge [ἐπιστήμης τινός], just as the art of a doctor, the art of a smith, or the art of a carpenter is [ᾧσπερ

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ἡ ἰατρικὴ καὶ ἡ χαλκευτικὴ καὶ ἡ τεκτονικὴ]? . . . And as we ought to be able say what the function [ἔργον] of each of these skills [τούτων τῶν τεχνῶν] is, so should we not be able to name the function [ἔργον] of domestic economy?’

‘Well then, it seems to me’, said Critobulus, ‘that the part of a good domestic manager is to manage his own house well’. (*Oec.* 1.1–2)

The Greeks were aware of a multitude of such forms of knowledge, often referred to in shorthand as ‘the skills’ or ‘all the other skills’. They were individually distinct, defined by their own set of rationales and purposes, but, on the other hand, they also belonged to the same class of human activity: the application of specialist knowledge towards a particular end (ἔργον, i.e. healing the sick, making tools, building houses, managing households). As distinct areas of expertise develop, so it becomes possible to distinguish between a skilled worker (in Greek τεχνίτης, in Latin *artifex/peritus*) who is acknowledged to have mastered a given discipline, and a layman (in Greek ιδιώτης, in Latin *imperitus*).²

Workers of all kinds could, and frequently did, specialize in a particular kind of occupation: a process which Adam Smith in his *Wealth of Nations* of 1776 termed ‘the division of labour’. He declares in the very opening of this work (I.i) that ‘the greatest improvement in the productive powers of labour, and the greater part of the skill, dexterity, and judgement with which it is anywhere directed, or applied, seem to have been the effects of the division of labour’.³ Smith demonstrated this effect with the example of a pin factory, where ten men could make around four thousand pins a day by dividing each element of the work of production between them, though one man alone would have struggled to make twenty pins by himself in the same time.

Such is the importance of specialization that at least some division of labour is found in most societies. For pre-industrial workers, the sheer effort needed daily even for the simplest tasks, such as fetching water or grinding grain, made some basic division of labour (such as between husband and wife) desirable, since the work needed to sustain life alone would be enough to overwhelm one person.⁴ In the second century AD, the sophist

² Such a distinction is made explicitly by, for example, Pl. *Soph.* 221c8–9, where the Eleatic Stranger asks if the angler is either someone with a skill or a layman (Καὶ μὴν ἐκεῖνό γ’ ἦν τὸ ζήτημα πρῶτον, πότερον ιδιώτην ἢ τινα τέχνην ἔχοντα θετέον εἶναι τὸν ἀσπαλιευτήν).

³ Smith 1993[1776]: 11.

⁴ On the occupation of ‘water-carrier’ in antiquity, for example, see the contributions to this volume by Lewis and Landskron.

Aelius Aristides appears to suggest that ‘maids-of-all-work’, whose lives must have been ones of unremitting drudgery, were only to be found in poor households. By contrast, he praises the Romans, as a people, for specializing in one ‘art’, that of warfare, and thereby becoming more effective soldiers:

For those who were yesterday shoemakers and carpenters are not today infantrymen and cavalrymen, nor is one who was just now a farmer kitted out, as though on a stage, as a soldier, nor, as in a poor house, do the same individuals cook and keep the doors and make the beds: not so have you mixed up your work. (*To Rome, Or.* 14.71)

As Aristides indicates here, the division of labour applies equally to simple household tasks and more complex occupations.

The widespread benefits of specialization in all areas of human activity were appreciated long before Aristides. Thus Plato has Socrates note in his initial description of a state that no one worker is self-sufficient: several specialists are required in any community if they are to satisfy all its needs:

SOCRATES: ‘Tell me, then’, said I, ‘what size of city will suffice for the provision of [food, shelter, and clothing]. Will there not be a farmer for one, and a builder, and then again a weaver? And shall we add thereto a shoemaker and some other purveyor for the needs of body?’

ADEIMANTUS: ‘Certainly’.

SOCRATES: ‘A city, at an absolute minimum [ἢ γε ἀναγκαιοτάτη πόλις], then, would consist of four or five men ... Well then, would one fare better as one man working on many skills [τέχνη], or as one man on one skill’.

ADEIMANTUS: ‘It is better if one man practises one skill’.

(*Resp.* 369d6–11, 370b5–7)

Xenophon, however, (in a passage discussed in detail by Lewis in this volume) notes that such specialization, while desirable in that it increases the quality of work, is not necessarily found everywhere, but rather predominantly in large cities:

For in small cities the same people may make a couch, door, plough, table, and often the selfsame person builds houses and he is lucky if he can find enough clients to maintain him; indeed it is impossible for one person practising many skills to be proficient in everything [ἀδύνατον οὐν πολλὰ τεχνώμενον ἄνθρωπον πάντα καλῶς ποιεῖν]. But in great cities, because of the numbers of people who require each service, one skill

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[τέχνη] is enough to support each worker, and often not even a whole specialism is needed: instead one person makes shoes for men and another shoes for women. (Cyr. 8.2.5)

As in Aristides' example of the poor household, a poor town may constrain specialization. Yet specialization in one task, or even in one part of that task, promotes growth since it allows workers to become more efficient in their assigned role, which again is essential in a world without mechanization. As Smith argued, the division of labour, '*so far as it can be introduced*, occasions, in every art, a proportionable increase in the productive powers of labour'.⁵ Hence, again, the distinction between the skilled worker and the layman becomes necessarily yet more marked.

We may therefore expect to find such a division of labour occurring naturally in cities where there is sufficient market demand to support it. Edward Harris has shown that, in a large city such as Athens, there is indeed evidence for extensive specialization even as early as the classical period, and the same was certainly true for the urban centres of the Roman empire.⁶ In this volume, David Lewis argues that Harris' initial list of 170 Athenian occupations was if anything too conservative, while Alice Landskron demonstrates the extent of the division of labour in Roman Ostia. Moreover, Lewis argues, many of these specialisms formed the major or sole occupation for those who practised them.

A skilled worker, however, is not merely a specialist, since even porters or labourers can devote much or most of their time to one particular form of work. A 'skilled worker' or 'professional' must practise a form of specialist work that society acknowledges to be a skill: that is work that requires knowledge to achieve some specific good or benefit for the community. The division of labour thus naturally results in a hierarchy of occupations, in which some are deemed to require more skill than others.

To some extent, it was possible in antiquity to distinguish between mere work and skilled work. In the many curse tablets from classical Attica and elsewhere, the work (ἐργασία), but never the skill (τέχνη), of common traders, termed κάπηλοι, are the frequent targets of vindictive rivals or neighbours. One fourth-century Attic tablet is interesting, however, since it includes a curse against a specialist craftsman, Kittos, who is described as τὸν καναβο[υ]ργὸν, most probably a maker of wooden frames (κάναβοι) that were regularly used in the manufacture of

⁵ Smith 1993: 13.

⁶ Harris 2002. On specialization in the Roman world, see Ruffing 2016.

pottery.⁷ What is most significant is that it is not merely his work but also his skill (τέχνη) that is cursed, whereas only the souls, industry, and hands of the κάπηλοι mentioned in the same tablet are targeted. This is not a compliment on the quality of Kittos' work, which the author of the curse has bound in Hades, but testifies rather to an implicit awareness that some occupations are skilled and others are not. Such a distinction is similarly in evidence in Aristophanes' *Wealth*, where the Just Man asks the Sycophant first whether he is a farmer, then whether he is a merchant (ἄλλ' ἔμπορος; 904), and finally if he has learned a skill (τέχνην τιν' ἔμαθες; 905). The answer to all of these is no, but he does nonetheless make a living through his 'care for public and private affairs' (907–8). In this instance, skilled work is distinguished both from agriculture or trade and, moreover, from the 'work' of parasites which, though they be ever so industrious, brings no actual benefit to society.

Nevertheless, while the Greeks and Romans were aware that some jobs involved more skill than others, there was no absolute agreement as to which jobs could be described as skilled. In other accounts, the bar for what might constitute a skill might be set very low. Even Aristophanes' Sausage-Seller in the *Knights* is jokingly said to possess 'an immense skill' (ὑπερφυᾶ τέχνην ἔχων, 141), while Plato's Eleatic Stranger designates κατηλική and ἔμπορικὴ as forms of skill in the *Sophist* (223d–e). Xenophon's skill of *oikonomia*, mentioned above, mainly concerned farming. Yet though it may not be possible to discriminate strictly between unskilled jobs and skilled professions, nevertheless we can say that there existed a fluid hierarchy of professions. And in a market for knowledge, those workers deemed by their employers to possess *more* skill should naturally be in a position to demand greater rewards, in terms of pay and status. A single term such as τέχνη or *ars* may thus include a much wider range of occupations, of both lower and higher status, than the English term 'profession'. The focus of this book is largely upon those forms of specialist work that were, in the view of ancient contemporaries, highly skilled and consequently of high status. However, it is important to acknowledge that within a labour market *all* workers are continually engaged in a competition to justify (to their employers, patrons, and society) the usefulness of their work and the depth of their knowledge. In this sense, few or no forms of work were ever

⁷ IG III Appendix 87. Alternatively, he may have been a ropemaker if we read κανναβιουργός, from the word for reed or hemp (κάννα/κάνναβις). The problem with this reading is that this is an unattested term for ropemaker, which is otherwise σχοινοπλόκος or στριππειοπλόκος (the latter term being more specifically a maker of fibres made from hemp, as in e.g. IG II² 1673.40–1). See Gager 1992: 156; Eidinow 2007: 371–2.

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unquestionably skilled in antiquity and, until it was tried, the skill of no worker was beyond doubt.

2 *Professionalism*

The term most commonly applied in English to describe highly skilled and high-status workers is ‘professional’. Yet no Greek or Latin word corresponds precisely with this ‘etic’ term. Two important objections to a book on ancient professionalism may be raised at this point: (1) ‘professionalism’ is a modern phenomenon that belongs to a post-industrial world and, therefore, (2) the term ‘professionalism’, with its connotations of the modern workplace, is inapplicable to the ancient world. It may be worthwhile here explaining the reasons for these objections and why, nonetheless, we do not believe them to be warranted.

On the first, the term ‘professionalism’ is indeed often associated with an ideal type of worker who is, to some extent, a creation of the modern world. In origin, this type of individual principally belonged to ‘the three great professions of divinity, law, and physick’ (to quote an author writing in the British journal the *Spectator* in 1711). Yet over time many other practitioners in different fields have laid claim to the title of ‘professional’, often by modelling their activities and habits on those of churchmen, lawyers, and doctors, the ideal types of ‘professionals’. This process may be termed ‘professionalization’. It is now so advanced that in 2009 a UK government report could claim there were as many as 130 professions operating in contemporary Britain. These appear under the headings ‘life science’, ‘legal’, ‘management and business service’, ‘creative industry’, ‘public service’, ‘science’, ‘education’, and ‘built environment’ professionals.⁸ Many of these forms of work are either relatively recent creations or are older occupations that have since been ‘professionalized’.

Histories of the professions have, for the most part, charted their first beginnings from around the eighteenth century (at the start of the Industrial Revolution) through to the development of a class of ‘professional men’ and established professional organizations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁹ As one scholar has put it, ‘the professions as we know them are very much a Victorian creation, brought in to serve the

⁸ Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009: 14–15.

⁹ Histories of the professions that focus principally on the nineteenth century follow in the tradition of the earliest studies, such as that by Carr-Saunders and Wilson 1933. See the summary of scholarship in Burrage 1990. For ‘professional men’, see Reader 1966. For the English professions 1700–1850, see Corfield 1995. For the development of the professions in the USA before 1900, see Haber 1991.

needs of an industrial society', though they were admittedly rooted in 'older and very different institutions'.¹⁰ 'The rise of professionalism' is a cliché oft repeated in many of these works.¹¹ To demonstrate that professionalism is a relatively new phenomenon, sociologists such as Larson and Elliot have pointed to the fact that few professional associations can be dated earlier than the nineteenth century.¹² Marxist theorists, such as Larson, have been equally keen to argue that professionalism is a part of the modern capitalist system and so, like capitalism itself, not an inevitable part of human society. Current debates in sociology have similarly concerned the future of professions in the face of challenges to their supremacy from artificial intelligence and attempts to undermine their autonomy by state regulators and organizational managers. Many, such as Susskind and Susskind, are beginning to suspect that the age of professionals, apparently so peculiar to the modern age, is finally coming to an end.

In response, we argue that this objection is not sufficient to render a history of ancient professionalism unnecessary or inappropriate. First, as we have seen, specialized skilled labour is not solely a phenomenon of the modern age, or a result of industrialization, but was a feature of the civilizations of Greece and Rome, as well as those of the ancient Near East, India, and China, among other societies.¹³ Moreover, as we have seen, this specialized skill has a social and economic value. Workers could gain high status and privileges from skilled work and adopt ideologies similar to those of modern professionals. That such professions can exist in pre-industrial societies has long been known in the case of early modern England. Over the past three decades, historians have steadily demolished the old orthodoxy that English professionals before the nineteenth century were an appendage to the aristocracy or the gentry, and therefore a quite different phenomenon from their modern successors.¹⁴ It is of course indisputable that landed wealth and social rank, most importantly aristocratic titles, were a major source of social status before 1800, but we should not neglect specialist knowledge as a potential source of identity, authority, and even – as Penelope Corfield has suggested – 'power'.¹⁵ We argue in this volume that professional skill was of similar importance in Greek and Roman society and their economy, if not more so, since in neither ancient

¹⁰ Reader 1966: 2.

¹¹ See especially Reader 1966 and Larson 2013.

¹² Elliot 1972: 14–39; Larson 2013: 2–7.

¹³ See Lloyd 2017.

¹⁴ See especially Holmes 1982; Prest 1987; O'Day 2000: 8–16.

¹⁵ See Corfield 1995.

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Greece nor Rome was there anything strictly comparable to the hereditary aristocratic class that dominated Europe's *ancien régime*.¹⁶ It is also certainly true that modern technological advances and economic growth have led to a massive increase in the number of both professions and professionals. Yet, in this sense, ancient professionalism was quantitatively rather than qualitatively different from modern forms.

On the second objection we raised above, the definitions of profession and professionalism adopted by sociologists and modern historians were indeed developed to analyse the modern workplace and the modern professions that have arisen within it. Let us consider a few representative examples:

What gives [a profession] its distinctive stamp is that, through education and career-orientated training, a particular body of specialised knowledge is acquired and then is applied to the service . . . of others. The notion of service – of skilled service to the community in ways more highly esteemed socially than the skills of trades and crafts – is inseparable from a modern image of a profession.¹⁷

[A profession is] an occupation that regulates itself through systematic required training and collegial discipline; that has a base in technical, specialized knowledge; and that has a service rather than profit orientation, enshrined in its code of ethics.¹⁸

The list of specific attributes which compose the ideal-type of profession may vary, but there is substantial agreement about its general dimensions. The cognitive dimension is centred on the body of knowledge and techniques which the professionals apply in their work, and on the training necessary to master such knowledge and skills; the normative dimension covers the service orientation of professionals, and their distinctive ethics, which justify the privilege of self-regulation granted them by society; the evaluative dimension implicitly compares professions to other occupations, underscoring the professions' singular characteristics of autonomy and prestige.¹⁹

Members of today's professions, to varying degrees, share four overlapping similarities: 1) they have specialist knowledge; 2) their admission depends on credentials; 3) their activities are regulated; and 4) they are bound by a common set of values.²⁰

¹⁶ See especially Harris 1995: 17–21; Fisher and Van Wees 2015; and the discussions by Mayer, Stewart, and Mann in this volume.

¹⁷ Holmes 1982: 3.

¹⁸ Starr 1982: 15.

¹⁹ Larson 2013: x.

²⁰ Susskind and Susskind 2015: 15.

It is immediately noticeable that not all the criteria offered by these authors are exactly the same and that different emphases are observable in each (something to which we will return shortly). There are nonetheless off-recurring elements: specialist knowledge and training, a ‘service orientation’, high status or prestige, and regulation of some kind, usually undertaken by the professionals themselves.

Some elements of these definitions can be applied to the activities of ancient skilled workers. For both ancient and modern professionals, specialist knowledge is a key prerequisite. A ‘service orientation’ may also echo the ancient belief, articulated by Aristotle, that ‘every skill and method has as its aim some particular good’ (*NE* 1094a1–2). One Greek word often translated as ‘skilled craftsman’ (δημοεργός) in fact means literally ‘public worker’ or, we might construe, ‘worker for the good of the community’. Ancient professionals, as will be demonstrated in particular in the contributions by Harris and Mayer in this volume, can be said to have achieved a certain prestige in society in return for the services they rendered.

It is equally important to stress, on the other hand, that not all the attributes identified here are applicable to the ancient professional. There was never in antiquity any insistence on ‘systematic training’ that could be regulated, nor indeed were there any institutions capable of issuing official ‘credentials’ corresponding to modern degrees or diplomas. Collegial identity was common in the ancient world, though written codes of ethics, such as the Hippocratic Oath, were rare. Professional associations, though common from at least the Hellenistic period, were not a defining feature of skilled occupations in classical antiquity. As Aneziri demonstrates in this volume, associations of the artists of Dionysus could negotiate privileges for their members, yet membership of such bodies was far from compulsory and not an essential prerequisite for a professional identity. Finally, a key requirement posited by modern theorists is that a profession should be ‘autonomous’ and that professionals should be free to regulate and manage their own work, independent of organizational managers or the state (this is because society recognizes that only professionals have the knowledge to understand that work). Among sociologists, Eliot Freidson has argued that such autonomy, the ‘occupational principle’, is a key difference between professions and occupations.²¹ And yet, in classical antiquity, monopolies or freedom from state regulation were rarely demanded or secured and, aside

²¹ Freidson 1971; 2001: 32.