CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This book is about the social experience of work in the Roman world. It examines this experience through the lens offered by a particular set of workers – potters and ceramicists in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire. It undertakes this examination via the material remains of these workers and their work that are still preserved today – the remains of cleaned clay lying on work floors, pots discarded due to cracks and warping, modest structures built of mudbrick and stone, and scorched kilns reddened and blackened by long firings – in order to understand how everyday Romans lived and worked. Too often, ancient potters have been outshone by their products. This book refocuses attention on Roman potters, their communities, and their material culture to show how work happened and how it was experienced as a fundamentally social practice.

Just as there is increasing archaeological recognition that pots can be studied and analyzed in myriad ways to answer a multiplicity of social and cultural questions, so this book draws attention to the social lives of their makers, both through their experiences of working clay in their workshops and as part of their local communities, in order to enrich and complicate our understanding of Roman society. The potters that will be discussed worked on estates, in villages, and on the urban fringes. They manufactured dishes and plates, cooking pots and casseroles, and transport containers, and they were consequently embedded in different markets and operated at variable scales of production. Yet what binds these diverse examples together is the shared

demands and experiences of transforming clay into ceramic in order to make a living,[1] and what unites the analysis of these different contexts is a conceptual appreciation that "the social" and "the economic" are inseparable in a work setting. Through this exploration and analysis, the social structures and interrelationships, the economic ties, and the person–material connections are shown to underlay and interknit craft and labor in the Roman Empire.

This book draws together evidence from dozens of ceramic worksites from Asia Minor, the Near East, and Egypt – a record spanning over eight centuries (from the late second century BC into the seventh century AD). It represents one of the first attempts to integrate this material evidence into a social study. Archaeologists have employed the material record of ceramic workshops and their products for different means – most notably to analyze the organization of production and to reconstruct trade and ancient economy. Each of these archaeological applications employs the material record of pottery workshops and their production in different ways and to different ends. Clearly, ceramic workshops were undeniably economic places where goods were manufactured for distribution, and they were important as setting the starting point for the economic cycle of production, distribution, and consumption. However, they were also workplaces occupied for long hours by groups of workers, workers who lived within intersecting frameworks of tradition, work culture, labor practice, family, guild, friendships, and rivalries. A better understanding of the social and cultural lives of ceramics workers can offer a means of balancing and humanizing economic narratives. The workshop, from the perspective adopted in this book, is a locus for small-scale social encounters – as a place of social performances of status and hierarchy, economic competition, shared cultural practices, and community collaboration. Therefore, this book also promotes the social interpretation of archaeological workshops, beyond simply the Roman context.

As the following pages will show, many social dynamics could be at play in the ancient workplace. There are infinite combinations of relationships involved, but some particular examples have been selected as the evidence provides fresh perspectives on our understanding of potters and pottery for the period: the relationship between potter and workgroup; between potter and occupation; and the relationship between potter and pot within a wider community of potters. Some of these relationships can be interpreted through the traces of pottery workshops, the assemblages of their material worlds, and the human actors in them. What this relational approach demonstrates is not only how different workshop contexts were experienced but also how each

[1] While the majority of examples discussed in this book concern the production of pottery by potters, occasional examples of molded lamp, brick, and tile production are also referenced, and these should more accurately be referred to as ceramicists.

differing experience highlights the fundamentally social nature of working with ceramic. Taking this broad, synoptic, historicizing view – a view that also incorporates selected textual sources on potters, when available – allows the construction of a rich, theoretically robust exploration of how social work and labor was constituted in the Roman East.

SOCIAL HISTORY AND LABOR

Fundamentally, work unites people across time and space. At the broadest possible conception, work comprises those activities by which people sustain their lives (Harper and Lawson 2003, xi). The activities that are considered to be "work" are, however, culturally relative, and how work is recognized in terms of distinct professions distributed across different industries is therefore a fundamental means of structuring and characterizing society. This recognition is not novel for the scholarship of ancient work; while this book differs from many others in its approach and theoretical framing, it is not alone in attempting to socialize ancient work and labor – in the last two decades increasing attention has been paid by scholars (both archaeologists and historians) to the working lives of everyday Romans.[2] This social approach to the archaeology of Roman work and labor sits at the intersection of several ongoing conversations in the field of Roman studies. Some of these conversations concern the place of labor and craft professions in wider ancient society, whereas some reflect an archaeological interest in the products of labor – either in terms of their place in economic cycles or in material culture studies of consumer goods.

This current, modern interest in the everyday working lives of ancient Romans finds few parallels with most of the textual voices of that period, however. Many ancient authors probably would not have considered such modest ceramic workshops – or, indeed, workshops more generally – as warranting such attention. Some, in fact, were very candid in their views; neither Cato nor Cicero held craft workshops in high esteem, in spite of their willingness to profit from investment in such trades (D'Arms 1980; Reay 2005). In Cicero's well-known assessment of occupations (*De Officiis* 1, 150–51), craft workshops were not deemed places appropriate for men of standing and reputation (Lis and Soly 2012; Verboven 2014). Of course, the opinions held by Roman elites about those involved in the manufacturing professions certainly do not reflect the entirety of views recorded from antiquity (Joshel 1992;

[2] Roman work and labor, particularly of craft industries, is a driving topic as evidenced by several volumes appearing in recent years (Monteix and Tran 2011; Tran 2013; Bond 2016; Hawkins 2016; Wilson and Flohr 2016; Verboven and Laes 2016; Benton 2020; see Freu 2018 for discussion).

George 2006; Bond 2016; Lis and Soly 2016; Tran 2016). That said, because of the textual lens through which much of Roman society tended to be viewed in earlier scholarship, elite attitudes to manual work have received disproportionate attention (see Verboven 2014 for a fuller discussion). This has exerted a profound and distorting bias on how we understand work, its socialization, and its value in the ancient world, and it is key to move beyond this and understand the importance of craft industries in antiquity as critical in balancing historical narratives and experiences of antiquity – particularly modest professions, like ceramic work, that are best accessed through their material remains. The cultural anthropologist Herbert Applebaum, in his study of the anthropology of work, characterized its social role:

> Work is like the spine which structures the way people live, how they make contact with material and social reality, and how they achieve status and self-esteem. As anthropologists we are interested in work because of what it tells us about the rest of society, based on the viewpoint that basic institutions touch all institutions. (1992, ix)

Balancing and nuancing elite imaginaries of work, other bodies of ancient text provide clearer and more detailed evidence for the professional and personal lives of craftspeople of the period. Indeed, in some respects many dimensions of the socioeconomic experiences of these professions in the eastern Mediterranean have been successfully reconstructed by historians. Studies of professional associations have emphasized their sociability and civic activities (Kloppenborg and Wilson 1996; van Nijf 1997, 2002; Mees 2002, 217–18; Diosono 2007; Verboven 2016); how professionals worked collectively to foster and protect business interests (Mees 2002, 217–18; Venticinque 2010; Liu 2016); how the culture of such organizations reinforced a shared sense of identity (van Nijf 2002; Liu 2005); and how the local activities of such associations might vary in different urban contexts (Arnaoutoglou 2011; 2016). Contracts preserved on Egyptian papyri, for example, indicate how the training of new generations of craftspeople might be conducted through apprenticeship (Westermann 1914a, 1914b; Bradley 1985; Saller 2011; Freu 2015). Detailed analysis of occupational titles found on funerary stelae and in work contracts demonstrates how highly specialized the active work force was, even within single industries (Wissemann 1984; Zimmer 1985; Trombley 1987; Joshel 1992; Tran 2007; Iacomi 2008; Ruffing 2008; Hawkins 2016). Other texts have been useful in reconstructing business practices of the period through accounting records (Aubert 1994; Andreau 1999) and civic codes (Arnaoutoglou 2002; Aubert and Sirks 2002; Baldini Lippolis 2005; Riggsby 2010, 25–46). Yet still other texts concern workshop placement through construction recommendations (Saliou 1994, 1996) and private lease contracts (Berger 1948; Cockle 1981; Rowlandson 1998; Mayerson 2000; Martin 2001;

Du Plessis 2006). These sources provide bodies of evidence regarding the lives and activities of working professions that are otherwise extremely difficult to reconstruct from the archaeological evidence alone and that help to contextualize potters in a wider world of labor and working communities. The archaeological evidence presented in the following chapters therefore draws on such important textual comparanda.

WHY POTTERS?

In spite of this rich corpus of epigraphic and archival documents, few such records were written by or for "working class" audiences, leaving the lives of craftspeople largely without narrative from either personal or collective perspectives. Even references to craftspeople are relatively uncommon on stone or bronze inscriptions, and references to ceramicists and potters are especially uncommon – especially when compared to sources on other contemporary craftspeople for the period and region (Ruffing 2008, 208). This may reflect the status of professions too poor to have erected funerary monuments, too lowly to be referenced in major laws, or so ignoble that they are referenced demeaningly in literature (Joshel 1992, 1–9). That this was the case for potters is a view perhaps supported by Mayerson (2000), who analyzed the documented payment of potters making jars on Egyptian rural estates.[3] He determined that the payment to these potters was extremely low and supported a general picture of a penurious profession, so much so "that the term 'slave labor' might be appropriate" (Mayerson 2000, 100). Trombley, citing Diocletian's Price Edict, also notes the low wages paid to brickmakers (1987, 20, f. 21). Mees recounts that some potters described in Egyptian sources were cash-strapped to the point that they failed to pay a month's rent (2002, 265–66). What remains unclear, however, is the extent to which these examples of brick and jar manufacturers compare with other ceramicists working in differing contexts (especially urban contexts) and making different wares. Moreover, ancient wage data is inherently difficult to compare across different contexts (see Freu 2015 for discussion). Indeed, Mees notes that Egyptian lease contracts involving potters number approximately forty (out of a corpus of more than 50,000 documents), and these sporadic cases chronologically span a period of more than 1,000 years (2002, 257). The picture that we construct from such textual sources alone is incomplete.

Other references to the social position of potters further reinforce the impression of a laborer profession that was sometimes considered in pejorative terms. Rabbinic sources of the period, for example, describe potting as a dirty

[3] The wages were recorded on three well-known Oxyrhynchus papyri (*P.Oxy.* 3595–97), published by Bowman (1983).

job and reference potters among the "unrefined" people, alongside donkey-drivers, camel-drivers, shepherds, and shopkeepers (Magen and Peleg 2006, 92–93). The status associated with such work was deemed so undesirable that, in one text (B. Qidd. 82a), fathers were advised not to teach their sons the profession because it was a profession of a "robber" (Magen and Peleg 2006, 92–93[4]). Vitto recounts another Rabbinic text involving the son of a man trained in three professions (goldsmithing, glassmaking, and potting) and, when described by an individual who hated him, he was referenced as the "son of a potter," rather than that of a goldsmith or glassmaker (Midrash Numbers Rabbah 2.17, in Vitto 1986, 61). When considered in direct comparison to other craftspeople, again, the references to the status of potters sometimes seem disparaging.

The collective impression derived from these references is that some potters were among the working poor, whose social status was further denigrated through hard, dirty, manual labor. This, alone, makes them a profession of interest for understanding non-elite Roman society, and nuancing the textual record with archaeological data might complicate our understanding of how such a "lowly" profession was experienced in this period. However, status – whether defined through economic standing or social standing – is relative. Ceramic work was considered to involve "strenuous" labor by ancient sources (Midrash Exodus Rabbah 1.27, Vitto 1986, 50–51), but potting was simultaneously recognized as a skilled profession (Ecclesiasticus Ben Sira 38, 29–32; Vitto 1986, 61). It is unlikely that the sorts of views promoted by the likes of Cicero, or the Rabbinic sources, capture the nuance and ambiguity of this profession's status – a profession present in many communities across the eastern Roman provinces and whose products fed very different markets, were widely consumed, and were in constant demand. In fact, potters and ceramicists appear consistently in other (namely papyrological) sources with regular enough frequency to attest to their local importance from the Hellenistic to the Byzantine periods (Ruffing 2008, 80–81).

Funerary contexts offer an alternative view of craftspeople. There are examples of funerary inscriptions commemorating the lives, and the achievements, of many craftspeople and tradespeople from the eastern provinces. Within this larger corpus, references to potters are, again, limited (Freu 2015, 193–95), but there are occasionally rich local examples in an otherwise sparse body of evidence, such as the Late Antique funerary reliefs from the necropolis of Korykos in Cilicia Trachis dated from the fifth and sixth centuries AD (Patlagean 1977; Trombley 1987; Iacomi 2008; Gallimore 2010, 155). Of the 600 funerary reliefs, more than 456 inscriptions provide professional trade titles,

[4] Vitto (1986, 60–61) references this same text according to a different translation that does not include potters.

as well as military, civic, or Church titles. The appearance of so many epigraphic examples referencing modest crafts and trades likely represents a rather unusual regional habit of using professional title in private funerary commemoration within the community (Varinlioğlu 2011),[5] albeit occurring during a period when trade title, in general, is more frequently referenced (Ruffing 2008, 47). Nonetheless, the corpus indicates the active presence of dozens of professional trades in the town (Patlagean 1977, 159–63, tab. 7), and a considerable number (26 cases, or over 5 percent[6]) are described as *potter* (*kerameus* [κεραμεύς]) (Trombley 1987, 20). There are also instances of potters who served in the local Church parish, indicating their public role in local religious institutions (Patlagean 1977, 168, f. 58, inscription no. 643; Varinlioğlu 2011, 178). The frequency and the visibility of potters in this community has been attributed to their role in supporting the flourishing Cilician wine industry of the time and the important status of this industry in supplying Constantinople (Iacomi 2008), although again this was also a period when tradespeople seem to play a more visible civic role generally (Carrié 2002; Sodini 2003; Zanini 2006). Whether this reflects changing social structures in Late Antiquity or simply an unusual economic context, their community roles meant that their burial plots were placed alongside those of civic, military, and Church officials. The Korykos funerary inscriptions stand in contrast to references to the ceramic profession on other media in highlighting both the frequency of potters and their roles within local communities.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF POTTERY WORKSHOPS

The textual references to potters are clearly neither consistent nor easily interpreted and surely reflect a more complicated reality than that based on many textual references alone. The limited range of source types about the lives and work of potters places them among the textually "quiet" masses of the Roman world; occasionally appearing in public and private documents but rarely offering much with which to reconstruct biographies or social histories. Of course, many professions might be considered in these terms; based on papyrological sources, Ruffing identified a subset of professions as fundamental to a local village economy; these include baker, weaver, fuller, dyer, tailor, stonecutter, builder, carpenter/joiner, leather worker, blacksmith, goldsmith, barber, as well as potter (2008, 86–87).

Potters and their work, however, differ from these other Roman professions in one major respect: While the written references to potters are relatively

[5] Ruffing (2008, 34) compares the Korykos tradition of including work title to that at Late Antique Tyre.
[6] Gallimore (2010) cites an even higher figure (10 percent) for all ceramicists.

limited (like many other trades), the archaeological record of potters and ceramicists is unusually ubiquitous. In fact, from an archaeological perspective, ceramic work is surely the most widely and best-documented industry of the Roman period. Vestiges of workshop structures, infrastructural features (wheel pits, kilns), material culture used in making pottery (hand tools, molds, wheel bats), traces of raw materials (abandoned clay quarries, charred remains of fuel), as well as many millions of pottery products (both finished and failed) appear extensively, in all regions of the Roman world. Pottery kilns, alone, number in the hundreds across the eastern provinces (Hasaki and Raptis 2016). In contrast to other industries, like carpentry or blacksmithing (thought to have been present in most communities), ceramic workshops tend to be especially conspicuous archaeologically due to the preservation of archaeologically durable heat-transformed materials (kiln fragments, charcoal and ash residues) and the large scale and intrinsic archaeological conspicuousness of dumps with wasters. The specialized use of particular materials (especially clay) and the unique features of updraft pottery kilns (with elevated chamber floor) also make these worksites relatively easy to distinguish from the remains of other pyrotechnological industries.

This paradox – between a highly constrained (and biased) textual record and a prodigiously abundant archaeological record – has been well recognized by the occasional historical treatment of potters in the eastern provinces (Cockle 1981; Vitto 1986; Wilfong 2008; Gallimore 2010). The richness of the archaeological record of potter workshops provides a potential avenue into understanding the experience of lives oriented around craftwork in the Roman East and assessing the internal diversity present therein. A deep and comparative analysis of the archaeological record will show that the social lives and work experiences of potters working across this wide region, manufacturing different products for different consumers, or working in different centuries or within different religious and cultural communities were considerable. Consequently, the following chapters bring current archaeological evidence to bear on the wider discussions concerning the lived experiences of the Roman "working classes" through the occupation of ceramic work. They do so by framing and interpreting the material evidence in ways that draw on current archaeological and social theory in order to vitalize the quotidian experiences of this craft work – working to help, and yet compete with, neighbors in the same profession; working to learn community traditions, sometimes sustained over many generations; working for or within a powerful institution; working and engaging with the material world of the workshop. In these ways, the practices of potters are interpreted in their workplaces to reconstruct the lived experiences, the social contexts, and material entanglements of the Roman potting professions in the eastern provinces.

CERAMIC WORKSHOP STUDIES

In contrast to the potters of Classical Greece, those of the Roman and Late Antique periods have never been seen as artists (Hayes 1997, 12–14) and have never attracted the attention of art historians who long have attempted to understand masters, workshops, and schools making Classical Greek vases (Heilmeyer 2004). This has largely left the study of Roman pottery production in the hands of archaeological ceramologists. Perhaps for this reason, and perhaps in conjunction with the limited historical record regarding potters, many studies of Roman ceramic production have looked for interpretive inspiration in ethnographic studies of modern or historical pottery industries, rather than Renaissance painters. Consequently, the rich ethnographic record of the Mediterranean basin has directed the discussion of these workplaces toward anthropologically inspired social and economic questions (Curtis 1962; Hampe and Winter 1962; Matson 1973; Peacock 1982; Annis 1985, 2007; Nicholson and Patterson 1985a, 1985b; Crane 1988; London 1989; Henein 1997; Hudson 1997; Tekkök 2004; Hasaki 2011). This ethnographic and ethnoarchaeological focus[7] importantly has drawn attention to the people behind the pots and kilns. While comparative historical or ethnographic cases should be used with caution, there are instances in which more modern examples provide fresh perspectives on ancient evidence. As will be discussed, the ability of neighbors to associate products with their makers, the complicated social dynamics of economic competition within a workshop cluster, the "scaffolding" training of apprentices are all widely noted in both ethnographic and historical accounts, and while the specifics of any ethnographic or historical case are not analogous, acknowledging the regular appearance of these social dynamics in contexts of craft production opens opportunities to think through the archaeology of Roman potters.

There has long been an appreciation that these Roman pottery workshops can help to access the experiences of working communities via an understanding the socioeconomic organization of workshops (Peacock 1982; Hasaki 2011), the technologies of the period (Nicholson and Patterson 1985b; Costello 1997; Peña and McCallum 2009; Nicholson 2011), and apprenticeship and training (Hasaki 2012). Most notably, David Peacock's seminal work *Pottery in the Roman World: An Ethnoarchaeological Approach* has had an enduring impact on Roman archaeology. This is in part because of its effectiveness in

[7] Of course, ethnographic and more recent historical data can be overly simplified and analogies can be misused (see Gosselain 2016 for a thoughtful discussion). These are very real concerns; yet, for the study of the Roman past, modern insights into traditional potting work have also importantly helped direct research to the everyday life of non-elite working segments of Roman society.

populating the archaeological remains of workshops with people living according to Roman lifeways and institutions.[8] His interpretation of the archaeological record was consequently and convincingly presented as a means to access both the economic organizations of workshops and the social context of its labor, and it will be revisited in subsequent chapters.

POTTERY STUDIES

While the study of ceramic work and labor has received some attention by Roman archaeologists, the products manufactured in these workshops have attracted far greater interest from archaeologists invested in building local and regional pottery chronologies and typologies. Due to its preservation, frequency, and sensitivity to stylistic change, pottery has proven invaluable to modern archaeological practice. More numerous than coins and cheaper to analyze en masse than radiometric samples, pottery has been almost universally employed within Roman archaeology as a dating tool (for discussion, see Lund et al. 2006a). These typo-chronological studies relying on stylistic trends have additionally demonstrated the diversity of potting traditions and consumer practices maintained by communities across Asia Minor, the Near East, and Egypt, as well as the contours of change within local ceramic industries and their repertoire of wares.

As this foundational literature makes clear, stylistic and formal diversity can be observed even among settlements in the same region, and these local stylistic traditions were sometimes rooted in much earlier traditions that continued and endured in the workshops of the region into and during the Roman period; in some cases, these traditions have been tracked over as many as eight centuries. This is perhaps best documented in the case of tableware, which in the Hellenistic period showed significant variability across the eastern Mediterranean. The very distinctive Nabataean pottery manufactured at Petra is one such case of a distinctive regional tradition with its very thin ("eggshell") walls and its floral and vegetal motifs painted in red or brown paint on a buff fabric (Vickers 1994; Schmid 1995, 1997, 2000, 2007).[9] These wares were first produced in the Hellenistic period and came to influence other production centers. By contrast, the contemporary tableware market of Judaea during the Second Temple period involved locally manufactured plain ware pottery or

[8] The power of Peacock's narrative was its successful integration of social and economic themes, yet its reliance on other theoretical approaches of the 1970s and 1980s (systems modelling, production organization typologies, and neoclassical economics) has perhaps not aged as well.

[9] The pottery styles manufactured at Petra are thought to have inspired technological and stylistic changes at workshops across the wider region, and as far as Aqaba (Gerber 2001), Jerusalem (Perlman et al. 1986), and Taymud in Arabia (Maritan et al. 2017).