Women as “wool-workers” and “sex-workers” in Athens (fourth century BCE)

Des « ouvrières » de la laine et du sexe à Athènes (IVe siècle avant J.-C.)

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Documents

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The building of which the plan is given below, is located at the northwestern end of the urban area of Athens, in a corner of the city walls first built in 478 BCE. Situated near the Dipylon Gate and the Sacred Gate, just within the internal boundaries of the city, it lies in what ancient authors call the Kerameikos district, a neighborhood on the periphery where pottery workshops grew up on both sides of the walls (the classical necropolis being situated outside them). Excavations conducted by Greek archeologists beginning in the 1870s, and since 1975 by a German team led by Ursula Knigge, allow us to retrace the history of the building, today identified as Building Z, and interpreted simultaneously as a textile factory and a brothel.¹

The first building (Z1), dating from the years 440-430, was destroyed in an earthquake about ten years after it was built. It was succeeded by a second building (Z2) which, this time, did not survive the destruction of the city walls by the Spartans, after their victory over the Athenians in 404 BCE. In the aftermath of that defeat, workshops and shops very gradually revived their business, especially from the middle of the fourth century, south of the Sacred Way, the principal axis of Athens that passes through the walls at precisely the

¹ Knigge 2005.
spot that interests us here. This was the context in which the building (Z3) was rebuilt and would remain in use down to the end of the fourth century when an earthquake completely destroyed it.

Figure 1. Map of the location of Building Z3 at the edge of the city walls of Athens (from Ursula Knigge, *The Athenian Kerameikos* [1991], 9).

According to Ursula Knigge, Building Z3 covered a vast surface area of 500 m$^2$ and consisted of a single storey. The sloping tiled roof channeled rainwater into three large, subterranean cisterns that were connected to one another by an underground network. The main entrance was from the northeast and opened onto a large courtyard furnished with a well. Most of the rooms were arranged along the western side of the large courtyard, and coated with red stucco – the floor of the largest one (to the north) being decorated with colored mosaics. A second entrance, at the southeast, opened onto a smaller courtyard and group of smaller sized rooms – one of which had a decorated floor.

Figure 2. Plan of Building Z3 (based on the maps prepared by Ursula Knigge, *The Athenian Kerameikos* [1991], 89, fig. 80c).
Several hundred drinking and eating vessels were found *in situ*. A considerable number of loom weights (Fig. 4) was also discovered in every room. Lastly, goddess statuettes and depictions on amulets suggest a predominantly erotic and feminine register. The medal illustrated here, a little over 8 cm in diameter, is the most beautiful and famous example: we see a female figure, generally identified as Aphrodite, seated sidesaddle on a goat crossing the starry night sky. Phosphoros, the morning star, holds a light and precedes the mounted figure, while a vertical ladder separates them. An Eros and a dove (?) follow the movement of the goat toward the left of the medal (Fig. 3).

The archeological finds made it possible to determine the building’s function. The high number of loom weights, often in pyramidal shape (as illustrated here) essentially demonstrates the existence of a weaving workshop in each room. This fact, taken into consideration with the presence of cisterns and close proximity to a waterway, the Eridanos, is sufficient evidence for the archeologists to assert that it was a textile factory. In light of its size and the importance of wool-working, the building appears to have been much
more than a simple dwelling. The Attic orators of the same period inform us of the existence of shield, knife, and furniture factories that employed between 20 and 120 workers each. Yet not a single textile factory is documented in the texts. We should thus stress the importance of the supplemental information furnished by archeology: the workshops for producing ceramics, very prevalent throughout this zone, are similarly attested primarily by the excavations conducted on site.²

Who worked in these workshops? Although the literary tradition stresses the virtues of the citizen’s wife, quietly working at her loom like Penelope, other sources indicate that textile production was not undertaken exclusively in the domestic setting of citizens’ homes: comic authors and inscriptions from the fourth century mention female dyers, weavers, linen workers and even seamstresses, the majority of whom are today interpreted as having been slaves.

The number of slaves in Athens, a much discussed question, greatly exceeded that of free persons and particularly citizens, on a scale of four to eight slaves to every citizen. In everyday life, an individual’s freedom, transmitted by legitimate descent, was expressed in their individual autonomy, in the fact that they did not depend on anyone, even if ties of personal interdependence were considered normal in the context of kinship networks. Many free individuals, men and women, thus could have occupations that could be described as professional: selling products from their estate or trade, hiring out their labor for a day or month on a construction site, or even renting their bodies for a limited time (as in the case of _betairoid/ai_, banquet companions). Such work indicates the economic dependence of those who had to make a living in this way, but insofar as the tie to their employer took the form of a “fixed-term contract”, it respected the ideal of individual freedom and did not undermine a free person’s status. Slave labor, in contrast, was characterized by service for only one employer (the master or boss to whom the master rented out his slave), by the monotony of repetitive work performed at one location, and by the lack of any future prospects. Only manumission could release a slave from this work.

² Monaco 2012.
imposed “indefinitely.” In the case of the Kerameikos building, the systematic character of the textile work found in each of the rooms, which probably functioned both as dwellings and workshops, is a factor that scholars believe argues for slave labor.

Wool-working was generally considered women’s work in Antiquity. That does not necessarily mean that only women were obliged to perform it. The term for wool-workers, talasiourgoi, could grammatically be applied to either sex. That said, though, the term appears frequently in inscriptions documenting the dedication of bowls, phialai exeleutherikai, which attest to about 375 slave manumissions in Athens in the last twenty years of the fourth century, and is always used to designate women. These inscriptions mention the price paid for manumission – a silver cup worth 100 drachmas – and sometimes give the name and occupation of the person manumitted. Of the 63 women mentioned with their occupation, 51, or 81% per cent, are designated as talasiourgoi. A man is never associated with this activity. It is therefore probable that the workforce of a textile-making business consisted primarily of female workers, and in light of what has been outlined above, female slaves.

The banquet terracottas discovered in situ and the decorated floors suggest communal meals, which leads Ursula Knigge to infer that the building also functioned as a tavern – or inn. The building was probably open to all who, in this quarter of diverse activities (shops, dwellings, necropolis) located at the intersection of important thoroughfares, had some money to spend on entertainment where social interaction mattered.

Moreover, the female statuettes found at the site, especially the medal described above, led the same archeologist to propose a hypothesis that is often repeated by historians today, that the building also functioned as a place of prostitution, a porneion. In fourth-century Athens, without going so far as to imagine a cult specifically for prostitutes, the goddess Aphrodite is frequently invoked in the dedicatory offerings of sex-workers. According to an ancient, albeit

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3 Cohen 2009.
4 Todd 1997; Wrenhaven 2009.
5 Davidson 1997.
doubtful, tradition, a sanctuary to Aphrodite Pandemos was built at the foot of the Acropolis from income derived from public prostitution established in the city by one of Solon’s reforms (see the ancient references quoted by Athanaeus in his *Deipnosophistae* 13.569d-e). Fragments of fourth-century comic authors, moreover, also cited by Athenaeus, mention these public brothels, where the girls were shown half-naked to clients. The term *porneion*, the place of the activity of *pornai* (*pornē* in the singular, from the verb *pernēmi*, to sell) occupies the same semantic field as *ergasterion*, which means “factory, workshop”, thus showing that prostitution was regarded primarily as a form of work.\(^6\) While of course not all female slaves were engaged in sex work, all *pornai* were slaves. Placed under the authority of a brothel-keeper, the *pornoboskos*, who could be male or female, they were made available to their clients on site or rented out.

Epigrams from the Hellenistic period betray a desire on the part of many female wool-workers – slaves or otherwise – to become prostitutes. Such work would enable them, they claim, to make enough money – or relationships – to escape their miserable state:

Bitto dedicated to Athena her industrious loom shuttle, the tool of her paltry trade, a woman disgusted with the toils of spinners and the wretched cares of weavers; she said to the goddess, “I will take up the works of Cypris (Aphrodite), having cast Paris’ vote against you.”\(^7\)

If wool work brought nothing but misery, did sex work enable one to combine the profit and pleasure? That is what one worker, Nikarete, argues, if we believe an epigram attributed to a certain Nikarchos:

Nikarete, who once served Athena’s shuttles and worked many a warp on the loom, has thrown her basket, bobbins, and all her tools on the fire for Cypris before the temple. “Farewell,” she said, “to the paltry work of wretched women that withers the fresh bloom of youth.” The girl then took up garlands and the lyre and a delightful life of banquets and revels. She said, “I will give you a tenth of my profits, Cypris: take your share of the business and give me mine!”\(^8\)

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\(^6\) Leduc & Schmitt Pantel 2003.
\(^8\) *Anthologia Palatina* 6.285, attributed to Nikarchos.
Among the many wool-workers (talarisourgoi) mentioned in the manumission inscriptions, a certain number of them have significant names: Glykera (Sweet), Malthake (Tender), or are simply called paides, a term that generally means “child” but also one who submits sexually to another. Put differently, wool work and sex work are occupations that are associated explicitly in the votive dedications and implicitly in the records of manumission. In the latter documents, the words pornē and hetaira are definitely insufficient descriptions of a situation that has been left behind (slave) or not (yet) obtained (free courtesan).

The medal presented above has been read by Ursula Knigge as a metaphor for the trade of the workwomen in the Kerameikos workshop: just as Aphrodite rises in the evening and goes to bed in the morning, riding an animal beneath the stars, the wool-working slaves, once their day is done, might solicit the client who has come to drink in the tavern or sleep in the inn. Driven by their desire to escape their servile condition, or forced to undertake this nocturnal business by their master’s will, they hope that, by meeting and befriending rich or influential men, they might find the help they need to obtain their freedom. Unfortunately, the isolated nature of the medal and the polysemy of its iconography prevent us from proposing any one unequivocal interpretation. The motif of women riding a mount – often a goat, billy or nanny – in a field of stars, and accompanied by a ladder or doves, suggests several webs of meaning. Is it an invocation of Heavenly Aphrodite (Urania), whose cult is attested in Athens? Does the ladder signify the desire for communication between that divinity and the earthly world of mortals? Or should it be understood as symbolic of a wall that must be scaled for secret, prenuptial, or illicit meetings, for instance on festivals in honor of Aphrodite and Adonis? Or is it rather a symbol of the transition to adult sexuality, especially for young males? Nothing can be said for certain. On the other hand, the Kerameikos building proves that the link between weaving and the erotic, even if it admits of multiple interpretations, was sometimes rooted in the brutality of certain economic and social practices, namely the twofold

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occupation – wool and sex – of female slave laborers. For them, prostitution, even under duress, could have represented the hope of winning their freedom.

Some of these women may have been able to escape slavery and join the families of citizens by marrying a citizen, such as the famous Neaira from Corinth, protected by her lovers, and whose alleged machinations are described by Apollodoros (Demosthenes 59); but many did not get that chance.

The tragic event of the building’s collapse following an earthquake at the end of the fourth century has preserved the very objects which, some two thousand years later, permit us to know of the existence of wool and sex workers in classical Athens. Today on the site of the ancient factory, visitors can see the foundations of the exterior and interior walls of Building Z, as well as the remains of a peristyle house built in the first century BCE – the only trace that remains of the women who worked there.

Translated by John Dillon

Bibliography


