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THE IMAGERY OF TEXTILE MAKING
Gender and status in the funerary iconography of textile making
in Roman Italy and Gaul

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to present a comprehensive collection of motifs related to textile manufacture in the funerary iconography in Roman Italy and Gaul, and to discuss aspects of gender and status in such representations. The span in time is from the mid-first century B.C.E. to the early/mid-third century C.E. and the investigation comprises some 75 scenes, listed in a catalogue. The scenes are presented divided into five categories, based on a possible relation to the chain of textile manufacture: from raw materials to finished textile products.

Scenes related to work emerged in the funerary iconography in Italy in the first century B.C.E., in particular on memorials of craftsmen and artisans. This genre was later diffused to the western Roman provinces and gained wide recognition in Roman Gaul in Imperial times, and the scenes from Gaul predominate in number in this study. From an élite point of view, all manual labour had low status, but the funerary monuments give evidence of an opposite view by those pursuing an occupation – as a basis for both status and identity.

In accordance with Roman traditions, textile work was considered a female area of responsibility, especially the stages of spinning and weaving. In the funerary iconography of Roman Italy as well as Gaul, both men and women are represented in the funerary images related to textile making. However, the presentation of men and women is different. In spite of textile making being traditional female work, men outnumber women in all these scenes and situations, with one exception – that of spinning wool. Women are repeatedly represented with symbols of spinning and this is a visualisation of an ideal where women devoted to domestic work, symbolised by spinning, also represent the virtuous Roman housewife. A conclusion from the images is that men from certain social groupings could gain status by an occupation, while for women it was the opposite. Their status was enhanced by not being related to an occupation. This engendered view of work was also embraced by the social élite. The ideology of women primarily devoted to family and domestic life was furthermore promoted by Roman state policy.

Key words: Roman Italy, Roman Gaul, textile making, funerary monuments, iconography, status, gender, wool-work.