Some Observations On Urban Retail: the *sagarii* in Imperial Rome

“*Whatever the seasons make grow and whatever countries and rivers and lakes and arts of Greeks and non-Greeks produce are brought from every land and sea…Whatever is raised and manufactured among each people does not fail to be here at all times and overflowing…The city appears a kind of common emporium of the world(*Or*. 26.11-12.).”*

Among the multitude of shopkeepers, wholesalers, merchants, and traders actively engaged in the commerce of goods from around the empire in the city of Rome, the *sagarii*, cloak-sellers, represent a single, minor facet of the imperial economy. A close study of the 16 epigraphic texts erected by and for this group of sellers in and around the city can nonetheless advance our understanding of the structure of urban retail.In this paper, I will discuss the organization of the retail trade of the *sagarii* from sheep to shop front, concentrating in particular on the institutions (*e.g.cultores domus Augustae* and *cohors sagariorum*) the group formed within Rome.

Studies concerning retail are curiously absent from over a century of scholarship on the ancient Roman economy; especially considering how closely retail relates to issues of urbanization, scale, market integration, prices and currency, transport, trade, distribution, and questions of sophistication and rationalism in the economy. Recent publications, such as the *Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* (2007) and *Quantifying the Roman Economy: Methods and Problems* (2009), while extensive in scope and forward-looking, continue to focus on trade, manufacture, and agricultural production as the chief markers of economic growth and development. The few studies that discuss commerce in ancient Rome deal more with consumption than consumerism (Greene 2008, Jongman 2007).

Regardless of its absence in contemporary scholarship, the evidence for retail in Rome is ubiquitous. The *Forma Urbis Romae* depicts thousands of *tabernae* lining Rome’s streets, as well as *horrea* and several *macella* and *fora*, which acted as centers of commerce. The literary sources also attest to the thriving commercial scene in the capital (*e.g.* see above). Finally the epigraphic record contains numerous texts about retailers, providing data on social status, familial and business relations, and even the topographical locations of retail spaces. We may never be able to reconstruct the nature of the Roman economy with true accuracy, but unless we start incorporating research on the structure and development of retail, we will continue to expend our efforts building, at best, a very partial concept. This paper is small and concentrated in scope: the *sagarii* of imperial Rome, but by outlining the framework of one trade, I hope to increase our knowledge of urban retail in general and present a fresh and largely untried angle for approaching future work on the ancient economy.

Abbreviations

*AE* *L’AnnéeÉpigraphique*, published in *Revue Archéologique* and separately, 1888-

*CIL* *Corpus InscriptionumLatinarum*, 1863-

*ILS* H. Dessau, *InscriptionesLatinaeSelectae*, 1892-1916

Electronic Sources

Stanford Digital Forma Urbis Romae Project, http://formaurbis.stanford.edu/docs/FURmap.html, 09/20/13.

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