

Roman Glass Workers: Some Social Considerations
Lucinda Jaffe (University of Arizona)

It has been estimated the Roman glass blowing industry was producing 100 million pieces of glass per year by the 2nd century A.D. (Fleming 1999: 60). So many millions of glass vessels are reflected in the archaeological record and have been found all over the Roman empire. The technique and scientific aspects of glass blowing have also been examined (Henderson 2000: 24-98). The focus of this paper, however, is on aspects of glass production that do not receive as much attention: namely, the glass workers themselves. Through an examination of historical evidence, for example, the law of Alexander Severus which taxed glass workers, or the exemptions from taxes granted by Constantine (Trowbridge 1928: 118 – 119), as well as the archaeological evidence of grave epithets in which the deceased notes his occupation as a glass worker, like that of the *vitriarius* Antas in Mauretania or Julius Alexander in Lyon (Trowbridge 1928: 114), I will attempt to recover a picture of the social status of glass workers, the perception of their craft and even their perception of themselves. I will also look at literary evidence, both histories on glass, e.g. Pliny the Elder, *Natural Histories* 36.65-70, or a biography of the emperor Gallienus in which it is noted that, “he despised a glass, because nothing was more common,” (Treb. Pollio, *Gall. Duo*, 17.5). Poetry and prose works will also be considered, for example the Letters of Seneca the Elder, “I should like to show Posidonius some glass-blower who by his breath fashions glass into numerous shapes, which could scarcely be accomplished by the most skillful hand” (Seneca, *Epistles* 90.31).

Glass workers could produce cheap tableware available for a penny, as Strabo informs us: “At Rome a bowl or a drinking cup may be purchased for a copper coin,” (Strabo Geography 16.2.25) or intricate pieces fit for the wealthiest Roman. Thus, the questions of art and artisans will also be examined in light of signed vessels (for example, Ennion) seeking to learn about the glass workers’ creation of their artistic identity.

Bibliography

- Fleming, S. 1999. Roman Glass: Reflections on Cultural Change. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology.
- Henderson, J. 2000. The Science and Archaeology of Materials. New York: Routledge.
- Trowbridge, M. L. 1928. Philological Studies in Ancient Glass. Urbana: The University of Illinois Press.