

Apprenticeship as Social Institution in Roman Egypt

Papyrological, inscriptional, legal, and literary sources indicate that apprenticeship was a widespread and well-established practice in the Roman world. Over fifty apprenticeship contracts and registrations of apprentices have survived from Roman Egypt (Westermann 1914; Zambon 1935; Bergamasco 1995). This corpus of material has been used to inform discussions of a wide range of subjects including child labor, transmission of professional knowledge, investment in human capital, and family strategies (Bradley 1991; Freu 2011; Gibbs 2012; Saller 2007 and 2012). Drawing on the insights provided by recent scholarship of Medieval and Early Modern apprenticeship as a vehicle of socialization (esp. Munck, Kaplan, and Soly 2007), this paper moves beyond the approach which focuses on apprenticeship as an economic institution (Smits and Stromback 2001) by bringing to the fore its function as a social institution in Roman Egypt.

The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, our sources indicate that an apprenticeship was not merely a contract between economic actors but was often an agreement between neighbors, families, fellow practitioners of the same trade and/or fellow association/guild members (Venticinque 2010). As such, apprenticeship not only was closely intertwined with other existing networks in which both parties were involved, but also had an important role to play in fostering and cementing trust networks among craftsmen who entered into the contract. The networks that were linked by apprenticeship were both intra-generational and intergenerational, and would thus impact or even shape the connections among the next generation of craftsmen, the future masters. Second, it was far from uncommon for the master's family and the apprentice's family to share the disciplinary obligations as well as the obligations to "nourish" the apprentice. The relatively short durations of apprenticeship terms and the relatively common practice of "external" apprenticeship, that is, non living-in apprenticeship, in Roman Egypt may point to non-utilitarian concerns being as or even more

important than material concerns. The ritualized and symbolic side of apprenticeship, especially in cases where a master craftsman apprenticed a son or sons to a fellow practitioner in the same trade, should be stressed. Third, the paper closes with a discussion of how professional connections linked and/or reinforced by apprenticeship may have impacted the workings of occupational associations (*collegia/koina/synodoi*). A prosopographic study of masters and apprentices, especially from the dossiers of Tryphon and Pausiris from first century Oxyrhynchus (introduction to *P. Oxy.* II. 267; Biscottini 1966; Piccolo 2003), makes it possible to postulate the existence of different, non-overlapping, and possibly competing sub-groups or clusters within an association.

It is hoped that this exploration of apprenticeship as social institution will expand our understanding of not only the dynamic role that apprenticeship played in the world of craftsmen in ancient society, but also the multi-stranded ties that contributed to the formation of clusters or closely knit groupings within the larger population of craftsmen.

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