

## Reconstructing Workers' Lives in Archaic and Classical Greece

The study of workers' lives in the ancient world is not straightforward because the opinions of canonical authors are often so saturated with elitist bias that hearing the voices and envisioning the practices of the majority of the population who had to do hard labor for a living is extremely challenging (Lis and Soly 2012; Bourriot 2015). Yet most people's lives are and have been dominated by work. Therefore, when we elide the study of people who worked for a living in ancient Greece, we accept a considerable blind spot whereby the experiences, hopes, and fears of most of the people in the ancient world are lost to us.

This paper considers the evidence available to scholars hoping to reconstruct the lives of ancient workers. In particular, I focus on the group of people commonly termed *banausoi*, non-agricultural, skilled workers whose labors produced durable goods and who depended on producing these goods to make a living. This topic is especially appropriate for CAMWS in Lincoln, since the first seminal study of craftspeople in antiquity was published by Alison Burford Cooper when she was an employee of the University of Nebraska (Burford 1972).

I begin by reviewing the textual evidence for the role of craft-workers in Greek society. I demonstrate that Archaic literature displays a certain esteem for makers and aligns skill in craft with the highest echelon of society (e.g., Homer *Il.* 7.435–453; *Od.* 5.243–259, 23.190–201; Hesiod *Op.* 422–429). However, Classical texts suggest that artisans were considered to be undesirable members of the community by elites during the later 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries (Xenophon *Oik.* 4.2–3; Xenophon *Mem.* 3.7.5–6; Aristotle *Pol.* 7.1328b–1329a; Aristophanes. *Wealth* 507–526). Thus, while we may read about non-agricultural workers in the Classical textual sources, these sources are unlikely to allow us to reconstruct the lives of these individuals with fidelity.

Instead of dwelling on the attempt to catch oblique views of artisans through the lens of elite literature, I suggest that we can glimpse the values and voices of workers from ancient Greece most clearly by looking at the epigraphic and material records, especially the workshops and workers' tools that exist in the archaeological record but have yet to be fully put into the service of social history (e.g., Young 1951; Sanidas 2013; Tsakirgis 2015). I consider what material evidence can tell us about the kinds of spaces where *banausoi* worked and the objects that surrounded them. I then explore the ritual and belief systems that Greek artisans may have practiced, based on evidence from dedications and curse tablets in urban and rural sanctuary spaces (e.g., Peek 1941; Raubitschek 1998; Baitinger and Völling 2007; Rotroff 2013).

Although the voices of *banausic* workers are rarely heard directly in the canon of Greek literary sources, we can tentatively reconstruct some aspects of their lives through the material record. Workers faced dangerous or uncomfortable conditions on a regular basis. In a world of uncertainty, risk, and competition, they often turned to superstitious practices. While they participated in canonical Greek religious practice, the extent to which they were more active as clients of the sanctuary, accepting deals to build or repair temples or setting up shop to produce votives for pilgrims, rather than devotees themselves, remains unclear. Although archaeological evidence has its own blind spots, it seems likely that *banausoi* in ancient Greece are more likely to be revealed to us by a careful study of archaeological artifacts in their contexts than by efforts to reinterpret Classical texts.

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