

The Patron, the Brick Baker, and the Lead Pipe Maker:  
Women in the Bath Construction Industry of Central Italy

*Lavari...[h]oc est vivere!* As this inscription from Timgad espouses (*CIL* VII, 17938), bathing was one of, if not *the* social experience of Imperial Roman culture. Bathing in public was a right extended not only to men, but also women, children, and possibly even slaves (Fagan 2002). This paper, however, does not focus on those who patronized the baths, but a specific group – women – who took up the mantle of patron and performed vital roles in the construction of bathhouses during the Imperial period. Particularly after the second century CE, Roman women in Central Italy were crucial figures behind the construction and procurement of access to public bathing facilities, not only for other women but entire communities (Hemelrijk 2015). "If you build it, [s/]he will come," indeed! By examining stamped bricks, lead pipes, and dedicatory inscriptions found in connection with baths, perceptions of Roman women are overturned in light of evidence that reveals female manufacturers of building materials and benefactors of this fundamental cultural experience.

Names of numerous women are stamped on the bricks used to construct baths throughout Italy (Steinby 1974/5; Helen 1975). Women listed on these brick stamps operated as *dominae*, clay-bed owners, and *officinatores*, managers and private entrepreneurs (Setälä 2002; Becker 2016). Approximately 6% of those named on brick stamps are women, over 40% of whom share no discernible connection to the Imperial family, demonstrating that such capacities could be held by women outside the most élite social circles (Weaver 1998). In addition to their roles in manufacturing, I also assert, taking into account levels of literacy, that builders who constructed

a bath's *latericium* walls were familiar with the names of these women, thus emphasizing who held positions of power in the brick-making industry.

Correspondingly, lead pipes bearing women's names have been found throughout Rome and Central Italy, yet the contribution of these women to the pipe-making industry is often dismissed. It is presumed that women were part of the commercial end of the business and not involved in the physical manufacture of wares (Evans 1991). Imprinted feminine names, however, should not prohibit parallel attributions of work conferred on masculine counterparts. I contend that not only does evidence exist for their involvement in the pipe-making industry, using examples from other trades to support this claim, but also the physical capability for women to produce lead pipes does not preclude them from manufacturing these materials.

Upon completion of the structure, dedicatory inscriptions were displayed. Of over 300 inscriptions associated with baths, 10% name women, many of whom represent the primary or sole benefactor of the bath in question (Forbis 1990; Fagan 2002; Hemelrijk 2015). My paper uses epigraphic evidence to emphasize the ability of Roman women to act as patrons of such an expensive cultural fixture. The implications that accompany women-led dedications is also intriguing, as constructions were commonly named for their benefactors – e.g. the *Balineum Avelianum Muliebre* at Corfinium, named for Q. Avelius Priscus (AE 1961.109). I extrapolate from this model to conclude that baths dedicated by women conceivably also bore their patronesses' names.

Although past scholarship has diminished and even erased the active roles of women in the construction industry, recent research elucidates women's contributions to the labor force and their efforts to distinguish themselves within their communities. This paper reinforces these current developments. Through the prism of the Roman bathhouse, the broad scope of women

who could participate in the industrial economy can be surveyed. By using epigraphic evidence and drawing parallels with modern, male-dominated industries, we can reassess the world of business in which these industrialists engaged and how their contributions molded building activity.

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