

On Reading the Material Culture of Ancient Sexual Labor

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Can a single object change how we think about ancient sexual labor? Using the evidence of an artefact excavated near Pompeii, in this article I argue that our material evidence for sexual labor has not been properly appreciated, and that by more fully considering the range of human relationships associated with and enabled by objects, the possibilities for a more nuanced understanding of the entanglements of people, objects, sex, and labor become apparent.

Approaches to the archeology of slavery in the Roman world have advanced greatly in recent years. Far from invisibility, comparative approaches have been harnessed to find the presence of slaves beyond the visual evidence and material culture of restraint (such as chains, shackles, or bullae) to interpret more ephemeral archeological traces including graffiti and leather footwear.¹ Despite such advances, a glance at recent works on material culture and slavery in the Roman world reveals that there is still a heavy reliance on textual and visual depictions rather than on material culture.² However, considering the material production of labor in the Roman world is one way we can access slavery archeologically: from the storage of surplus indicative of a slave-owning household, to places where slaves worked and were held, to landscapes transformed by the labor of the unfree.³

But what can material culture contribute to our knowledge of sexual labor and to the debates surrounding slaves and sex? One way is the study of brothels, as Thomas McGinn has expertly demonstrated.⁴ Sexual labor within a domestic setting has not commonly been included in the economy of Roman prostitution.⁵ Nor have historians of ancient labor or archeologists usually considered sexual work (free or unfree) amongst household labors.⁶ Within the household, a slave had no choice but to participate in any sexual act the free members of the household desired of them. Any slave could be a sex slave.⁷ Within this asymmetrical power arrangement of masters and slaves engaging in sex, there must have been a range of relationships—from those slaves who lived under constant threat to those who consciously leveraged their own desirability

to try and improve their lot; indeed, these situations might coincide within a single person and complicate issues surrounding what we could consider to be consent. In this short contribution, I hope to show that material culture can be a powerful tool with which to reflect on how we think about sexual labor in the Roman world (and how we, as scholars, often do not). One way in which this is possible is by acknowledging the ambiguities in our evidence, and the multiple narratives that may be drawn from them. Acknowledging ambiguities encourages more reflexive and reflective interpretations, enabling the challenging of, rather than replication of, power structures both within our discipline and in the Roman world.⁸ Archeological evidence is by its nature material, fragmentary, and complex; this needs to be acknowledged in our treatments of it. Further, we need to consider the possibilities of different agents and their interactions with material culture, rather than privileging a particular viewpoint—usually, the one that most closely mirrors our own.

To focus the discussion, I will concentrate on one particular object that has been prominent within scholarly narratives on slavery: an inscribed gold bracelet from Pompeii.⁹ This object has been variously interpreted as a love-gift to a slave and as evidence for prostitution. The interpretation of the bracelet as a “love-gift” was initially that of Felice Costabile.¹⁰ It appears in the 2013 catalogue for the Pompeii and Herculaneum exhibit in the British Museum, with the following comment: “We can only guess at the relationship between the [giver and receiver], but the nature of the armband suggests she was highly esteemed.”¹¹ Jonathan Edmondson, in his chapter on slavery and the Roman family in the *Cambridge World History of Slavery*, uses this item of textually inscribed material culture from Pompeii to illustrate what he sees as one aspect of household slavery:

On occasion, ongoing emotional bonds developed between a master and his slave. A fine gold bracelet discovered just outside Pompeii on the arm of a female victim (aged about thirty) of the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79 provides perhaps an inkling of such affection, with its inscribed message, ‘The master to his very own slave-girl’ (*dom(i)nus ancillae suae*) . . . the presence of the touching dedicatory inscription strongly hints that this was a lover’s gift.¹²

There are several issues raised by these interpretations. The first concern is the nature of the relationships they imply between the master and the slave, as one of reciprocal affection (rather than a relationship character-



Inscribed bracelet/armband from Moregine. Gold with glass paste eyes. SAP 81580, su concessione del Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo—Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Pompei, Ercolano e Stabia.

ized by its exploitation and brutality). While Edmondson more broadly recognizes sexual relations of slaves with masters as a sign of their “degradation,” only Michele George (also in *The Cambridge History of Slavery*) specifically hints at the darker side of the relationship surrounding the bracelet, writing that it “evidences the complex interplay of emotional attachment and coercion.”¹³ Edmondson goes on to discuss the likelihood that Roman wives were “emotionally scarred by their husband’s philandering,” and the power of “sexually attractive” slaves to disrupt the marital relationship (and hence, implicitly, the production of legitimate offspring) or the relationship between father and son.¹⁴ While these comments find support in the literary sources, it is not surprising that the only perspective within the household *not* presented is that of

the person who is presumed to have worn the bracelet, and thus the only agency ascribed to her by Edmondson is that of the ability to disrupt normative Roman family relationships with her sexual attractiveness and availability. Neither of these were, in all likelihood, within her control.

Given the breadth of our knowledge on Roman slavery and its many horrors, the question must be asked why such an object and inscription immediately conjures “emotional bonds,” not revulsion, or “inklings of affection,” not a realization of the comparability to modern situations of sexual abuse and exploitation, such as the trafficking of women and forced sexual labor.¹⁵ As has been noted by David Mattingly, among others, there has been a tendency among classicists to characterize ancient slavery as having been “milder” than modern forms.¹⁶ Is it that the idea of the Roman family is so very strong that we have internalized the idea that domestic slaves are outsiders on the inside—that is, that we are repeating the ancient Othering of household slaves, considering certain members Roman household to be lesser? Or that the material qualities of a fine gold bracelet are so strong in a modern context that it could only be conceived of as a positive, even romantic, gift? Is there a need, in some way, to make ourselves feel better about domestic slavery? Finally, why is the default position that of the master or his apparently long-suffering wife? The slave woman only enters the scene when she is made of gold.

A further possibility for the interpretation of this bracelet has also been made, which proposes the bracelet was a gift to a slave who was a prostitute, potentially to make her more attractive, and thus it has been read as evidence of the prostitution of female slaves.¹⁷ If this is correct, the bracelet and its apparently amatory inscription become a statement of possession (with emphasis on the *suae*), and invite associations with examples of domestic slaves being prostituted by their masters, as we read, for example, in Livy and Valerius Maximus.¹⁸

But what evidence is there that this bracelet was worn by a domestic slave or a prostitute? In assessing the possibilities for the ancient use of the bracelet, we should consider the archeological context, which is not, in fact, from a domestic situation. The bracelet was found in excavations conducted in November 2000 in a small room of a structure, identified as a *caupona* at Moregine (south of Pompeii), on a woman estimated to be about thirty years old, along with other jewelry on her person and in a small bag that she carried.¹⁹ Also found were remains of an additional adult woman and three children, two of whom were estimated four and fourteen years old in age.²⁰

The assemblage of objects was not limited to the inscribed bracelet. The woman who was wearing the bracelet was also found wearing a hair-clip and a ring on her left hand. In the small bag she held were another pair of bracelets, an anklet, and a long-braided chain of the type worn on the torso, crossed under the breasts, in addition to some coins.²¹ The long gold chain, 242 cm. in length, has been compared to those depicted on an otherwise naked woman receiving cunnilingus depicted in a painting from Pompeii's suburban baths, although finely decorated body chains need not necessarily be associated with sex laborers or slaves.²² It has been suggested that the small sack containing jewelry might represent all or part of the *peculium* of the *ancilla*.²³ In any case, the overall impression of the Vesuvian context is of a small group of women and children carrying a hoard of objects representing portable wealth that could be relatively easily made liquid. We cannot know whether the objects belonged to the woman who died with them, or whether she herself looted them. In either circumstance, it is likely the people found were in the process of trying to escape the fate of Vesuvius's eruption, to which they fell victim. That the bracelet was found on the body of a woman, however, and not in the bag with other precious items is perhaps suggestive of a personal connection between the object and its wearer.

The inscribed bracelet is made of gold. It is in the shape of a snake, a flattened band curled three times to wrap around the arm. The snake is recognizable from its carved tail and head, with inlaid glass paste eyes, and also from the engraved scales that cover much of the object's exterior. When coiled, the bracelet is about eight cm. in diameter. Bracelets in the form of snakes are frequently found throughout the Hellenistic and Roman worlds.²⁴ Similar snake bracelets are worn on the lower arm (below the elbow) on the first-century CE Egyptian mummy portraits of women excavated by William Flinders Petrie at Hawara.²⁵ Such objects are generally interpreted as being for high-status women to wear as a "passive visual display" of the wealth and status of her husband or family.²⁶ The use of gold in jewelry not only was indicative of wealth, but had very strong status associations (in earlier periods, for example, there had been class restrictions on who could wear gold rings).²⁷ Prostitutes, by contrast, were (at least in the Latin poetry of Catullus, Propertius, and Martial) reportedly marked out as wearing different garments (e.g., togas and no veils),²⁸ although the situation in reality was undoubtedly more complicated, not only in terms of the garments that were permissible but in the range of luxurious items (or lack thereof) on display.²⁹ In Pompeian paintings, as already noted, nude women engaged in sex acts

are sometimes depicted wearing fine jewelry; at another extreme of adornment, in North Africa, we know of a prostitute from her slave collar.³⁰ Weighing a reported 500 grams,³¹ the weight of almost 70 gold *aurei*, the Moregine bracelet would have been an expensive object, but we cannot say whether this was a relatively large or a small expense for the person who purchased it. We might also consider the labor value of the monetary cost of the object—more than the annual wage of a Roman soldier. The physical properties of the gold would have ensured that it was a noticeable item, one that advertised its value.

The inscription is on the third coil of the snake, near its head, on the interior of the bracelet.³² The inscription is composed of carefully made fine punches rather than incisions. When the bracelet was on the body of the wearer, an observer would have no idea of the inscription or its implication. The message is intended exclusively for the wearer; presuming they could read it or have it read to them.³³ The inscription is anonymous: neither the master nor the ‘slave girl’ (remembering the bracelet was found on the body of a woman of about thirty years old) are actually named.³⁴ We might read this anonymity as in some ways humiliating, just as easily as we might read it as affectionate. Without the inscription, to someone observing the wearer of the bracelet, this would be a gendered status symbol, which was expensive, decorative, and conspicuous. We do not know, of course, with what other garments it might have been worn, but to the wearer it would have the additional and perhaps conflicting resonance of enslaved possession.

Alongside the interpretations noted above, beside domestic slavery and prostitution, we might add other possibilities. Given that the bracelet is indeed made of gold, which we would normally expect only to be worn by high-ranking women, could the inscription be using slavery as a metaphor, perhaps even within a marital relationship? We have, for example, from Roman Britain an example of an inscribed ‘wedding’ ring that bears the *external* inscription “slave to love” (*servus amoris*).³⁵ *Servitium amoris* is also well known in Roman elegy, and while these phrases are different from the *ancilla* inscription of the bracelet (and perhaps indicative she was not a metaphorical slave to passion), the way in which the ideology of slavery permeated Roman society and personal relationships is clear.

The inscribed bracelet may or may not relate to ancient sexual labor. Since we do not know, and since there are many alternative possibilities, we must recognize the choice being made by scholars in favoring a single narrative. To move forward we must leave room for ambiguities in our

evidence. Perhaps even more difficult is leaving room for alternate voices: Even if a master meant this as an affectionate gift, must we assume it was received as such by its wearer? What possibilities open up when we attempt to consider the bracelet from the perspective of slavery and the slave?

If, let us say, the bracelet was worn by a prostitute (mindful of the inscription, of course, which does not include *meretrix*), was she happy to see her appearance enhanced and thus potentially conducive to attracting more customers? Were any of the children she was found with her own, and was their father the *dominus* of the inscription? These are not only different possibilities of interpretations but ambivalences inherent in the object. We need to be open to the range of meanings and viewpoints, and ask what our readings tell us not only of the Romans, but of ourselves and our own interpretative processes.

Interrogating the different readings of such an object is relevant for its own sake, but also for how an understanding of sexual labor can contribute to our knowledge of how the Roman world functioned.³⁶ Sexual power in an imperial context can be linked to Roman sexual values more broadly, including the maintenance of hierarchies between rulers and the ruled.³⁷ Within the household, permitted sexual behavior was also linked directly to social status. Messages of male control and violence can be found throughout Pompeian houses.³⁸ Sexual labor permeated not just everyday life but the Roman worldview. This could be further scrutinized in other contexts as well. For instance, sexual labor in the army, and the members of the military community who would have performed it, have largely been ignored.³⁹ Within that community were included male and female slaves, concubines, and prostitutes.⁴⁰ We also need to consider other categories of sexual labor and exploitation which form a part of Roman armed conflict.⁴¹ The potential for asking such questions expands as detailed artefact work reveals the presence of women and children within Roman military bases more broadly.⁴² In addition to the evidence of objects, archeological considerations of the spatial component of sexual violence have also been shown to be useful.⁴³

Finally, we must return to the initial question of whether it is appropriate to consider a bracelet such as that described here as evidence of an 'affectionate' relationship between a master and slave. Even if we take very literally the inscription (*dom(i)nus ancillae suae*) and even if a master did give his slave girl an expensive and visible gift, his gift was not the act of manumission, and his "very own slave girl" she remained. The presence of the *dominus* (master) is implicit in *ancillae suae* (his own slave

girl), but the written word *dominus* in the inscription textually and materially reasserts the power relationship and places it close to the body. *Ancilla*, similarly, notes the continued, enforced, intimate association of a domestic slave, disempowering her, even if the relationship was in fact affectionate, or marital, or consensual. Given the age of the wearer, it might not reflect a current relationship, but a freedwoman would always be a former slave, a woman always a former girl. *Sua* (his own) is unnecessary in an inscription that references both a master and slave, so its presence might allude to the claim on something not in fact his own: someone else's slave, perhaps, although a shiny gold bracelet is not the most covert of gifts.

Alternative readings, too, whether assuming the bracelet's wearer was a prostitute or more metaphorical love slave, still bear out the fact that sexual power and sexual labor were an intrinsic part of Roman society, and this could be enacted and reinforced in multiple ways, including through material culture. The preferred, singular readings described at the start of this article are particularly safe in reinforcing received ideas about the Roman family and Roman prostitution: the alternatives are destabilizing. In these perhaps ambiguous, disruptive options we have the opportunity to hear the voices of Other Romans. A beautifully made gold bracelet might have more in common with iron shackles than we usually think.⁴⁴

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Notes

1. Driel-Murray 1995 and Webster 2008.
2. Nor, indeed, is the materiality/spatiality of those visual sources considered; see, e.g., the contributions in George 2013.
3. On slaves in houses, Baird 2012, 160; *ergastulum* at Chalk, Kent, Webster 2005, 166–8; landscapes of control, Friedman 2009.
4. McGinn 2004; for a recent review of the Pompeiian evidence, McGinn 2013.
5. As noted by Marshall in this volume; however on the Roman female body as an economic resource generally, Flemming 1999, 42.
6. E.g., Scheidel 1995, Hendon 2004, and Zuiderhoek 2013, although see Voss and Casella 2012 for archeological discussion of sex work in later periods. We might question whether scholarship has to some extent inculcated Roman perspectives on sex work in which women were considered "more as wares than workers": Flemming 1999, 56. See Richlin 2006 on the entanglements of sexuality and slavery in the Roman Empire.
7. Slaves trafficked specifically for sexual exploitation should be considered as a distinct category; for a comparative approach to ancient and modern sex slaves, see Marshall 2013. On the issues surrounding the distinctions (in a modern context) between sexual slavery and trafficking for sexual exploitation, O'Connell Davidson 2006; on the historical archeology of sexual violence, Farnsworth 2000.
8. On the need for ambiguity in archeological interpretation, Gero 2007.
9. The bracelet is Soprintendenza archeologica di Pompei, no. 81580.
10. Costabile 2001.
11. Roberts 2013, 140.
12. Edmondson 2011, 352–3. In the same volume, George (2011, 397) also considers it a "message of amorous possession," but suggests it "evidences the complex interplay of emotional attachment and coercion" (note, however, that George reports the bracelet was not found on the body, but this is not what the original reports indicate; further bracelets were indeed found in a small sack alongside the body, but Costabile [2001, 448] notes the snake bracelet was found on the woman's person).
13. George 2011, 397.
14. Edmondson 2011, 353.
15. On modern situations of sexual slavery, see, e.g., O'Connell Davidson 2006 and 2014.
16. Mattingly 2008, 136.
17. Scarano Ussani 2003; this alternative interpretation was also noted by Edmondson. For a reading "between" prostitution and affectionate master, see Licandro 2004.

18. McGinn 2004, 35, citing Livy 39.9.5 and Valerius Maximus 6.1.6; also McGinn 1998.

19. Costabile 2001, Fig. 4, which pictures the small bag; the caption notes the *ancilla* was holding it at the time of her death. Costabile (2001, 455) observes that the ability of a master to use his slave to gratify his own sexual desires could happen at any time, and was part of histories of slavery and oppression, regardless of other facets of the relationship.

20. For details of excavation including a plan of the structure in which the women were found, see Costabile 2001. On the sexing and ages of the human remains, Guzzo and Scarano Ussani 2001, 981 and Costabile 2003, 259; also published in Guzzo 2003, 169, 178. Initial reports had identified the second adult as a male, and the pair were reported in the popular press as “evidence for what may have been an ‘upwardly mobile’ caste of former female slaves . . . ‘kept’ as lovers by their masters . . .”: Johnston 2000, reporting with quotes attributed to Professor Antonio De Simone.

21. Costabile 2001, 448–52.

22. Costabile 2001, 464–5 and 2003, 260; see also the painting from the Casa del Centenario IX, 8, 6, cubiculum 43, south wall, in which a nude woman engaged in sex wears a similar chain and an armlet on her upper arm: Guzzo and Scarano Ussani 2000, 39. For an example of a more elaborate gold body chain, from a Romano-British hoard, see Johns 1996, 96–7 on the fourth-century Hoxne body chain.

23. Guzzo and Scarano Ussani 2001, 990–1; the authors conclude (997) that whether the wearer of the bracelet might be a slave or prostitute, the assemblage nevertheless is relevant to the history of slavery, including sexual slavery.

24. See, e.g., Johns 1996, 109–11 and Stout 2001, 78. Copper alloy, silver, and gold examples are all attested, and the motif is also known from finger rings. The snake form is sometimes ascribed an Asclepian connection. Other examples of gold snake bracelets are known from Pompeii, e.g., British Museum 1946.07022, although that example has a circular profile: Roberts 2013, 140. For gold bracelets from Herculaneum (each with snake-head terminals at both ends, and with inlaid green glass eyes), found in a bag of jewelry recovered with a female body, Roberts 2013, 288.

25. E.g., Petrie Museum UC28084, British Museum EA 69020, Walker 2000, 66–8: gilded portraits of women both wearing snake bracelets, in this case with snake heads at both terminals. Each individual wears a pair, one on each arm, in addition to other jewelry.

26. Kunst 2005 and Swift 2009, 141.

27. Stout 2001.

28. Clarke 1998, 103.

29. Olson 2002 and 2006.

30. An inscribed lead collar found during the excavations of the Temple of Apollo at Bulla Regia, apparently found still on the remains of the woman: *ILS* 9455; Merlin 1906, 366–8; Thurmond 1994, 465–6. The inscription reads: *Adultera, meretrix (sum). Tene quia fugivi de Bulla R(e)g(ia)*.

31. Costabile 2001, 448.

32. Costabile 2001, 452.

33. Licandro (2004, 293–4) notes that the wearer, not a third party, is the one meant to read the inscription.

34. Guzzo and Scarano Ussani 2001, 989.

35. From Insula XIII, phase 9–10 (late fourth century), found in a mortar leveling of a surface. The ring is copper alloy, with the inscription finely made on the exterior of the ring, which was decorated with turquoise frit inlay and red enamel: Niblett et al. 2006, 139–40. On the *servitium amoris* in Roman elegy, Copley 1947, Lyne 1979, McCarthy 1998.

36. On the contributions of sexuality studies to other fields of archeology, Voss 2008.

37. Mattingly 2010, 94–121.

38. Koloski-Ostrow 1997.

39. As noted by Mattingly 2010, 114; see, however, James 2006, 34–5. On a comparative approach to camp concubinage using the evidence of footwear at Vindolanda, Driel-Murray 1995.

40. Varon 1994 and Allison 2013, 22. There is evidence, e.g., from third-century CE Dura-Europos of prostitutes and other ‘entertainers’ who moved with the military garrison: Baird 2007, 428–9.

41. A comparison with ‘comfort women’ might be drawn here; see Tanaka 2002.

42. Allison 2006, 2008, 2013.

43. Voss (2000, 40–54), drawing on the work of modern feminist geographers, shows what a spatial analysis can contribute to a study of sexual violence, efforts to control sexual activity, and consensual sexual practices in a colonial setting. Detailed spatial analysis of slaves, e.g., within Roman houses, has usually been limited to the search for slave *cellae* rather than the full dynamic of power relations within the house; see George 1997 and 2011. After this article was submitted, Joshel and Petersen 2014 was published, which includes a discussion of the slave within the Pompeian house and the spatial component of slavery there.

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