

Cleverness, cleanliness, and urine in ancient Rome

There is a lot of graffiti in Pompeii. This is a rather clever one scribbled on the façade of a house on the Via di Nola: FVLLONES VLVLAM Q[VE] CANO NON ARMA VIRVMQ(VE).¹ In translation, it reads, “I sing of fullers and the owl, not of arms and the man”. A parody of the very beginning of Vergil’s *Aeneid* (*Arma virumque cano*), this graffito cleverly subordinates the legendary accomplishments of Aeneas to the work of fullers. The topic of the *Aeneid*, the founding of Rome from the tattered remains of a once mighty Troy, has been diminished. The labours of fullers, on the other hand, have been elevated to an extraordinary degree.

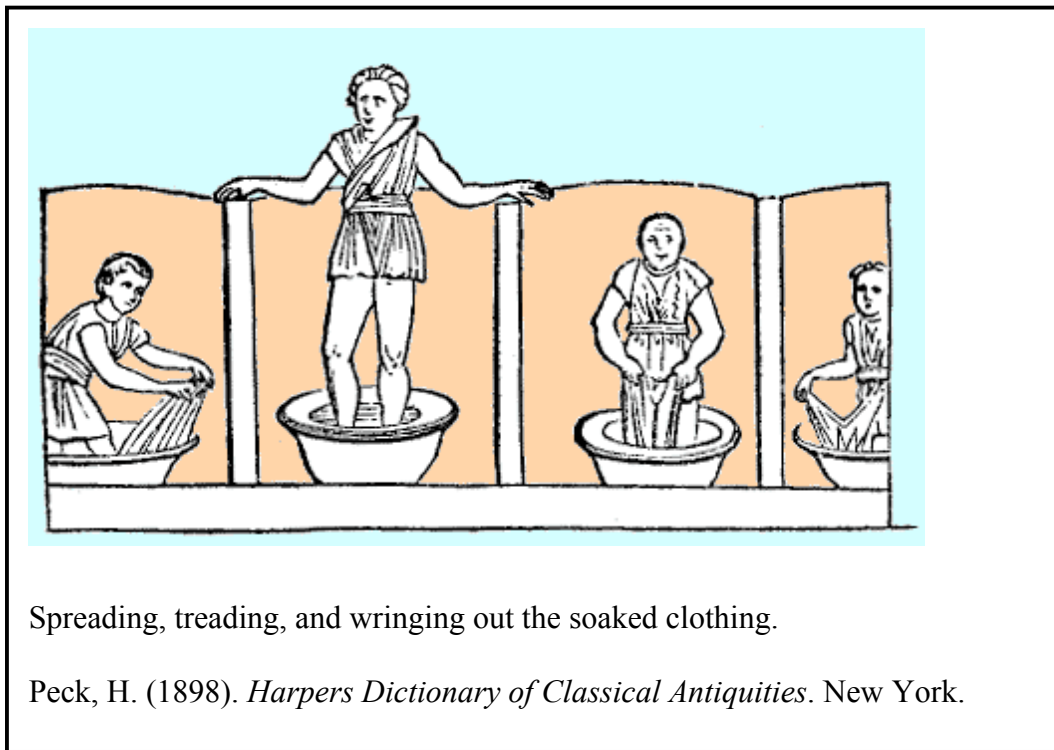
At this point, it is necessary to explain what the deeds of ancient fullers were. Fullers, or *fullones*, are the ancient equivalent of today’s dry cleaners. Images of them and their shops often feature an owl, the bird that represents Minerva. Under the protection of the goddess of war, wisdom, crafts, and commerce, fullers took on the business of treating clothing, both new and worn. They polished and smoothed cloth once it was finished on the loom. Of far greater importance, they worked with urine, nitrum, or fuller’s earth in laundering. Of these three agents, urine was the most heavily used.

The cleaning of Roman clothing was no insignificant undertaking. Roman clothing was made of natural fibres. The most heavily used material was wool, employed as it was for tunics, stolas, and togas. Natural fibres worn in a hot climate frequently require serious cleansing, even purification, and this is exactly the service *fullones* provided to their customers. An abundant source of urine was required for this task, and collected from large clay pots placed at road intersections, outside shops, or at public

¹ *CIL* 04, 09131. To see a copy of the graffito, see: [http://www1.ku-eichstaett.de/epigr/uah-bilder.php?bild=\\$CIL_04_09131.jpg](http://www1.ku-eichstaett.de/epigr/uah-bilder.php?bild=$CIL_04_09131.jpg).

urinals. Fullers became quite the connoisseurs of urine for they avoided the pots outside of taverns. Pee discharged after a session of drinking is low in nitrogen, an agent necessary for proper washing.

Once the urine was collected, the laundering procedures could take place. Dirty garments were first soaked in a heated mixture of urine and water in a fulling stall, a tub that had raised sides for resting one's hands on. Next, men or boys would tuck up their clothing and step and stomp upon the soaked linens so as to separate dirt, oils, and sweat from the fabric. Finally, the clothing was taken out for rinsing. After the dirt and urine was rinsed from the material, wring followed. This required at least two men in the case of togas, the average size of which could extend to twenty by ten feet.

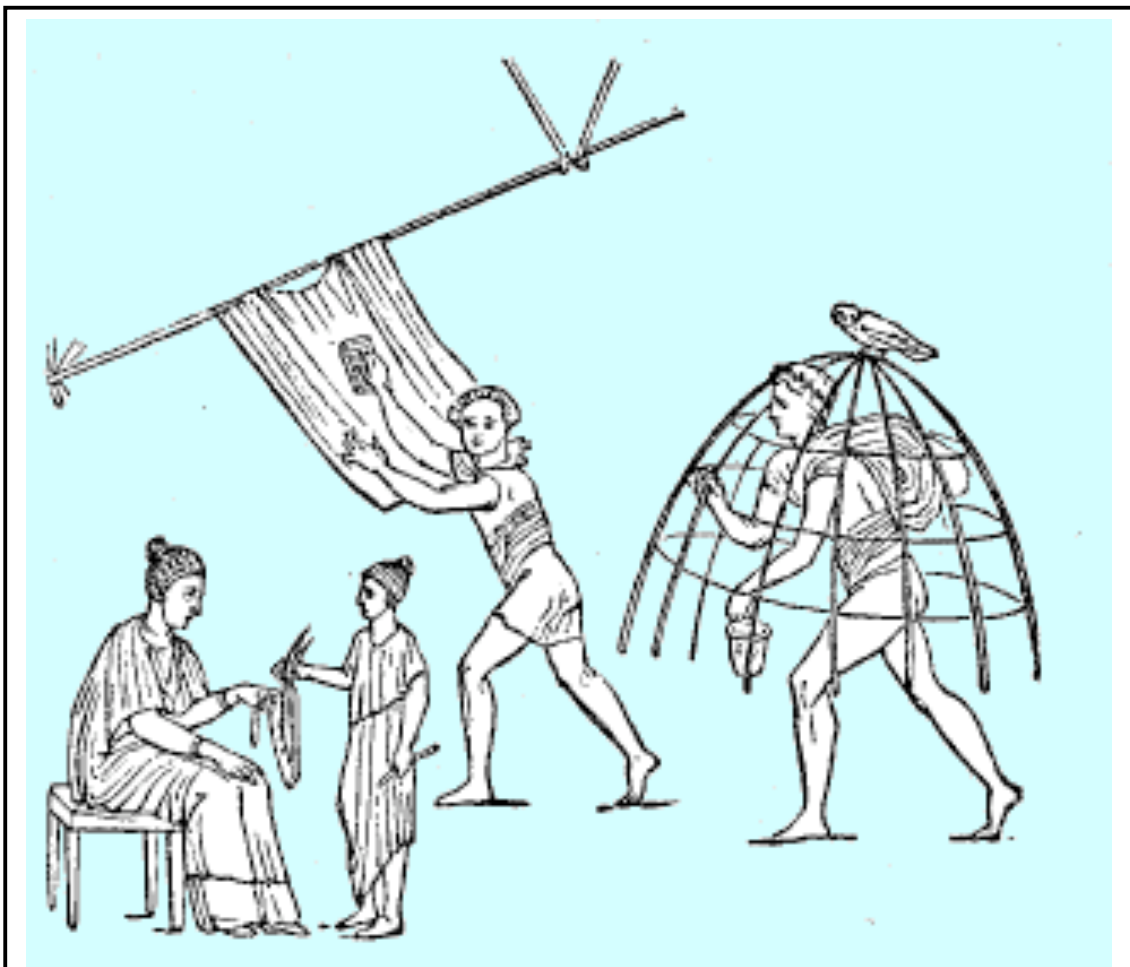


Spreading, treading, and wringing out the soaked clothing.

Peck, H. (1898). *Harpers Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*. New York.

Once the cycle of soaking, washing, rinsing and wringing was complete, the clothing was

hung out to dry, often in front of the front doors of the fuller's shop. Dry clothing was carded, or straightened with a hedgehog or a special comb in order to raise its surface texture. In some cases, clothes were hung on big baskets that look rather like birdcages, and sulfur was burned underneath in order to artificially whiten the cloth. These procedures are captured in the sketches above and below, both of which are based on mural paintings found in Pompeii.



Seated woman examining the work of a young girl; man carding a tunic; man carrying the wicker cage used for whitening. He carries a pot, perhaps filled with sulfur. Note the owl on top of the cage.

Peck, H. (1898). *Harpers Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*. New York.

For those living in ancient Roman urban centres, the importance of laundry workshops - and urine - should not be underestimated. People did not wash their clothes at home, largely because most houses could not house the large and necessary cleaning facilities. And because most Roman clothing was light in colour, regular cleaning was essential. Furthermore, treating soiled clothing with urine made use of an abundant resource left in public toilets and pot. Without this service, cities and towns would have had to pay for the removal of urine, and would have had to deal with a smell that was already apparently pretty strong.

Thus can the graffito found on the house of the fuller Marcus Fabius Ululitremulus make its vaunted claim. The latter man belonged to a respected field, one that had its own trade association, and that was important enough to have censors decree the way in which clothing was to be washed (Pliny XXXV 57). The fact that his most important cleaning agent was urine should make the reader of the graffito laugh, but not hold his/her nose at the profession and its practitioners.

Further reading:

Pliny's *Natural History* is a great source for seeking information on fulling - and urine.

See in particular, XXVIII 18. 26; XXXI 46; XVII 4; XXXV 50, 57. In addition to cleaning, urine was very much used in medical diagnosis and treatment.

See: <http://www.ostia-antica.org/dict/topics/fullones/fullones.htm> for examples of archaeological remains of *fullonicae*.

Adkins, L. & Adkins, R.A. (1998) *Handbook to Life in Ancient Rome*. Oxford.

Flohr, M. (2003) "Fullones and Roman Society: a Reconsideration", *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 16: 447-450.

Peck, H. (1898) *Harpers Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*. New York.

Wilson, A. (2003) "The Archaeology of the Roman *Fullonica*", *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 16: 442-46.