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Women in Roman Business and Industry

From at least the first century A.D. onward, women played an active role in Roman business and industry. Women of the lower classes, many of them freedwomen, were self-employed (as painters, for example, or musicians or midwives) or they worked for others, in small businesses as well as in large industries. One of the chief industries in the city of Rome, the brick industry, employed women as workers; but it is perhaps of more significance historically to note that, from the end of the Flavian period, the brick industry seems largely to have been controlled by women. Like the clothing, container, and shipping industries, the Roman brick industry grew up to meet the needs of the rapid expansion experienced by the city after the time of Augustus. Women were active in all these industries, but perhaps our most accurate evidence about the extent of their commercial involvement comes from the brick stamps. Bricks were commonly stamped with trademarks naming the factory, its owner, and the worker who made the brick. Volume XV of the Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum lists hundreds of such stamps. Bricks by the millions were used to construct the skeleton of the city. Bricks for such structures as the Colosseum and the great imperial fora, baths, and palaces were mass-produced in numerous factories, very many of which were owned by noble women. Plotina, the wife of Trajan, Arria Fadilla, the mother of Antoninus Pius, Faustina the Elder, and Faustina the Younger are among the dozens of women named on the stamps. The two chief tycoons, however, are the Domitiae Lucillae, mother and daughter, who owned between 108 and 155 A.D. as many as 46 separate brick kilns near Rome. The younger Domitia Lucilla was the mother of Marcus Aurelius. The brick industry which she inherited from her mother was a family business, founded by her mother's grandfather, the famous orator and politician, Cn. Domitius Afer of Nimes. He died in 59 A.D. Domitia Lucilla the Elder died in 123. Her daughter inherited the industry and ran it from 123 to her death in 155, six years before her son became emperor. Her husband, Annius Verus, father of Marcus Aurelius, is also occasionally named on brick stamps of his own, as are such emperors as Trajan, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius himself. Female names, however, predominate on the Roman brick stamps. It is clear that these women were not serving as facades for their husbands. They were running industries which they had inherited in their own right. By the end of the second century A.D., the brick industry of Rome was largely in the hands of the women and men of the imperial family and may well have been an important underlying factor in imperial power.

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