

Craftwork in Roman Cologne – A Microeconomic View on Cluster Structures Regarding Transformation of New Ideas

Ella Magdalena Hetzel

During an archeological measure in 2015 at Tel-Aviv-Street in Cologne a minimum of two mid-Empire and late Roman glass huts were excavated. The arrangement of the workshops suggests that they were part of an economic cluster. Through field research on the construction side a minimum of three workshops and a total of four ovens were documented. Several findings, like fragments of glass melting pots, threads, caps and wastes surrounding glass pipes, indicate the glass blowing activity in this area. Embedded as an empirical part in the research project on agglomeration structures of craftwork businesses in Roman Cologne, the example of Tel-Aviv-Street offers the opportunity to have a look on its dynamics on a microeconomic scale. One part of a complex process within craftwork clusters is the adaption of new ideas, which can be redrawn superficially with the very first evidence of Conchylia Cup production in a room of the eastern workshop of Tel-Aviv-Street.¹

Studies on dynamics of cluster structures are mainly investigated in an economic frame. The theory describes a field within economic science, which was first presented by Alfred Marshall at the end of the 19th century.² The first attempt to contextualize this idea was done by Alfred Weber, who defined advantages and disadvantages through agglomeration of industries and its dynamics at the beginning of the 20th century.³ During the 1990s cluster studies gained new interest by researchers through Michael Porter, who looked at clusters in a national context.⁴

Basically cluster structures provide an easy access to labor market, have a cost reducing effect and play an important role for knowledge transfer and further development.⁵ An interesting field of economic clustering is represented by craftwork businesses, which sometimes have a long historical background. Studies of modern workshop clusters show, that dynamics within these structures strengthen sales on markets.⁶ But not only economists deal with the phenomena of agglomeration within industries – this intensive development is also identified for ancient archeological contexts.⁷

The research project on Craftwork in Roman Cologne ties up with studies on ancient craftwork clusters and reflects effects of its dynamics on the basis of an archaeological database. It focuses on an ancient capital in the northwestern Provinces, which is surrounded by multiple resources and a rich natural water system. Thus Cologne was found to be situated in an economically attractive region.⁸ The archeological record for craftwork businesses within the Roman city includes over 70 excavation areas, which show evidence of localized structures. Although most of the data are in connection to pottery production, Roman glass industry also shows an impressive development in its products, which is primarily reflected in sepulcher contexts.⁹

One of these glass workshop clusters, which forms an empirical part of the research project, is the Tel-Aviv-Street in Cologne. A special product blown in one of these glass huts is the Conchylia Cup, which is an exceptional piece of artistic work and a good example for knowledge transfer within the Roman Empire. All along the Mediterranean and in the Germanic area different styled pieces of this glass type have been found. The cups follow a strict arrangement, which requires profound knowledge in marine biology.¹⁰ Nevertheless techniques of Conchylia Cup production transferred to regions, which are characterized by a fluvial environment. Surely adaption and further development of this type, successfully lasting into early Middle Ages in northwestern Europe, profited from dynamics of agglomerated businesses.

Summing up the research on cluster structures in the capital of a northwestern Province tries to redraw complex processes far away from Rome. It approaches the topic combining economic theory with archeologic datasets. Through geographic mapping and a database concerning workshops and produced goods new details on positive as well as negative effects in ancient clusters will be provided. Furthermore microeconomic studies in Roman Cologne reveal, that organization of workshops in agglomerations had a beneficial influence on adaption and transformation of new ideas within the Roman Empire.

Notes

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² Marshall 1890, 222–224.

³ Weber 1909, 124. 128.

⁴ Porter 1990, 148 f.

⁵ Enright 2003, 105–107.

⁶ Lehmann – Müller 2010, 124–126.

⁷ Peacock 1982, 38; Goodman 2016, 323.

⁸ Grabert 1998, 237–239.

⁹ Höpken 2005, 56–58; Naumann-Steckner 2016, 116.

¹⁰ Lega – Gessani 2004, 81 f.; Whitehouse 2001, 139.

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