A Warped Version: Manipulating Roman Looms for Metaphorical Effect – Potamius of Lisbon’s Epistula de Substantia 5-9

Magdalena Ohrman
University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Faculty of Humanities
m.ohrman@uwtsd.ac.uk
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0865-4546

Abstract

Potamius of Lisbon’s highly metaphorical explication of the indissoluble nature of the Trinity in the 4th C theological treatise Epistula de Substantia combines technical knowledge of textile crafts with stylistic manipulation of Latin intertexts and terminology in a metaphor for the unity of the Trinity. This paper explores several passages in De Substantia densely packed with textile terminology and deemed obscure in earlier Potamian criticism, and shows how, based on a detailed knowledge of the practicalities of wool-preparation as well as of weaving, Potamius enhances the effectiveness of his metaphor by carefully manipulating the presentation of technological detail and intertextual references to earlier descriptions of textile work in Latin literature. Potamius includes references to different loom types to strengthen the impact of his weaving metaphor, and to create correspondences between the set-up of a loom and crucifixion. Potamius’ understanding of the workings of the warp-weighted loom is related both to intertexts in Ovid and Seneca and to the archaeological evidence for the continued contextual relevance of this loom type in Lusitania and the Iberian peninsula, and to domestic and traditional craft practices.

Keywords: Potamius of Lisbon, Epistula de Substantia, Weaving metaphors, Warp-weighted loom, Roman textile tools

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The description of weaving and weavers’ tools that emerges in Potamius of Lisbon’s highly metaphorical explication of the indissoluble nature of the Trinity in the 4th C theological treatise *Epistula de Substantia* combines technical knowledge of textile crafts with stylistic manipulation of Latin intertexts and terminology. Such technological contexts have hitherto been largely overlooked in scholarship: the *Epistula de Substantia* has mainly attracted attention for its potential to throw light on Potamius’ rejection of Arianism sometime after 360 and for its relationship to Potamius’ career as bishop of Lisbon.¹ The aim of this paper is to make clear the technological – rather than theological – background of Potamius’ weaving metaphor, and to resolve several passages densely packed with textile terminology which have been noted as ‘particularly obscure’ in Conti’s recent commentary.² The paper will also show that, despite possessing a reasonably detailed knowledge of the practicalities of wool-preparation as well as of weaving, Potamius enhances the effectiveness of his metaphor by carefully manipulating the presentation of technological detail and intertextual references to earlier descriptions of textile work in Latin literature.

1. The shape of the cross

At the core of Potamius’ metaphor for the unity of the Trinity is the cross-shape of the weave as the tunic takes shape on the loom:

nam ipso telae patibulo feminae quasi in crucis ambitu pendere tunicas discunt. et ure ad similitudinem crucis factutae uestis insigni miraculo tela praetenditur, cuius per qualitatem spatii indiscissis pinnarum lateribus, procurante pollice praesidentis, insuitas et fila seruantur. nam et tunica ipsa quae in habitu crucis orditur, ut probat res officio [...]³

For the women learn to suspend tunic weaves on the bar of the loom as if on the beam of the cross. And truly, the web of the growing cloth is stretched out on the loom in likeness of the cross in a miraculous sign. Through the type of spacing [of the warp] with no-cut sides for the sleeves, and the care of the weaver’s hands, its seamless nature and its threads are preserved. For

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³ Potam. *de Subst.* 5.