Chains of gold: female status and the Roman catena in the early Imperial period

Abstract

This article considers the Roman body chain (catena), which comprises two long lengths of woven gold chain worn crisscrossing the torso. Roman illustrations of women wearing catenae demonstrate that the form carried strongly erotic connotations relating to the goddess Venus and female sensuality. A small corpus of preserved body chains from the Vesuvian region testifies to their actual use by women in the first centuries BC and AD. This study examines the status of the women who wore such jewellery, which combined clear economic expense with erotic messaging. In opposition to claims that the sexual nature of body chains signals their association with prostitutes, it is argued here that visual and textual sources contemporaneous with the Vesuvian chains point to women of “respectable” social categories having both the freedom and incentive to express a confident sexual identity. Important archaeological evidence offers further indications for the ownership and use of catenae by Roman women of varying status. The potential meanings and motivations underlying the shared use of this symbolic form of adornment are also addressed.

Introduction

Straps, bands, and chains worn crossing the chest have a considerable history throughout the ancient Mediterranean and Near East. Rudimentary depictions of such forms are found in figural art as early as the Ubaid period (c. 5300-4300 BC) in northern Mesopotamia and occur sporadically over the course of the Bronze Age across the Middle East, extending to Peshawar and Egypt. Illustrations of these adornments emerge in the Greek world beginning...
in the late Classical and early Hellenistic periods, with more detailed representations appearing subsequently in Etruscan and then Roman contexts, where they are present through the late stages of the empire.

The current study centres on the Roman iteration of the body chain (catena) as an especially promising subject for those seeking to understand how ancient jewellery operated as a cultural sign, constructing and advertising social identities. This is thanks to a clear set of associations encountered in representations of catenae in Roman visual media. Patterns in how catenae are depicted on the body and the artistic contexts in which the chains occur demonstrate that the form carried and conveyed specific status-related messages regarding the wearer.

The catena is above all feminine jewellery, as it appears almost exclusively on women. The chains’ X-shaped design is well suited to the female physique, isolating and highlighting the breasts, wrapping around the waist above or along the hipline. Decorative elements can add further emphasis, drawing the viewer’s attention to the space between the breasts or to the navel. Arranged on the body, catenae are depicted as being worn in one of two ways: across the nude torso, or over thin, clingy drapery through which the form of the wearer is exposed. Contextually, in artistic illustrations, body chains typically appear on two types of stock figures: the goddess Venus (FIG. 1) and anonymous (non-mythological) women in symplegma scenes (FIG. 2). Consequently, these features signal the catena as sensual adornment linked to a uniquely feminine erotic expression.

The actual use of gold body chains by Roman women is supported by a small corpus of preserved catenae. At least seven body chains have been uncovered in the Vesuvian region and date to the first centuries BC and AD. From a technical viewpoint, these catenae demonstrate their place in the corpus of fashionable, fine jewellery of the early Imperial peri-
od; the decorative elements (hemispherical bosses, wheels, crescent pendants) and the various forms of loop-in-loop chain seen on catenae are also found on other pieces of contemporary jewellery from around the empire. What sets the catenae apart is the large quantity of gold used in their construction and the length of chain required for the design. The techniques and materials used on this scale produced monumental versions of popular chain jewellery styles. The expense of such objects must have been conspicuous, and the affluence of the wearer was surely conveyed alongside the catena’s erotic messaging.

The combined elements of sensuality and wealth make the body chain an unusually provocative form of jewellery, raising questions as to the status of the women who wore them. Scholars have insisted that the erotic character of catenae indicates their association with prostitutes, women whose social identities were marked by a need to promote their sexuality and who may have had the economic means to do so using costly dress forms. Literature and visual imagery contemporary with the Vesuvian chains, however, complicates this assertion; these sources speak to a notable degree of sexual autonomy and expression among elite women of the period. This freedom paired with a drive to sartorially advertise one’s taste and wealth suggest that women of both high (“respectable”) and low (“non-respectable”) rank were invested in using catenae to communicate an assertive sexual identity. Body chains and associated finds recovered in excavations at Moregine and Oplontis further support this argument. The implications and possible motivations underlying the use of catenae by women of varying status are explored in the conclusion.

Women and sexual autonomy in textual sources

On the surface, women’s sex lives in the first centuries BC and AD appear to have been strictly controlled through Augustan social reforms, which advanced the ancestral values of monogamy, piety, and chastity through a programme of law codes and moral rhetoric. These initiatives were aimed squarely at Rome’s aristocracy, attempting to curtail licentious and immoral behaviour while promoting marriage and birth rates among the upper classes. Yet, literary evidence provides a much more complex picture of female status and sexuality in the early Empire, often running counter to Augustan ideals. The figure of the matrona pursuing the pleasures of sex is conspicuous in contemporary sources, suggesting that at this time elite women were willing and able to maintain erotic relationships irrespective of marriage vows or threats of legal penalties.

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13 See Berg in this volume.
14 The same argument has been made regarding sheer, finely woven silk garments (vestes coae), which were reportedly popular among Rome’s aristocracy despite their association with indecent, sexually available women. Such clothing stands in stark opposition to the stola, the heavy woollen, floor-length shift introduced in the Augustan period as the ideal dress for matronae. Although contemporary moralists link the stola to elite female respectability and modesty, artistic and literary sources seem to suggest that it was not often worn. On vestes coae, see Olson 2008, 14; and n.78 below. On the stola, see Olson 2008, 27-33.
15 For a detailed assessment of Augustus’ gendered political ideology, see Milnor 2005. For Augustan laws on marriage, children, and adultery, see Frank 1975; McGinn 1998, 70-104, 140-215.
16 This shift in sexual behaviour occurred alongside other important legal changes that granted women control over their own property, wealth, and marriages. These new freedoms have led some to characterise the brief period as one of female emancipation, e.g. Cantarella 2009, 135-159, esp. 140-143.
Oft-cited evidence for this development is found in the genre of love elegy, which emerges in the first century BC in the writings of Catullus, Propertius, Tibullus, and others. These poems detail the fraught erotic relationship between the smitten, submissive male poet and his capricious puella. The identity of these sexually charged women has been long debated among Classicists, who have probed the poems for allusions to the figures’ status. The resulting analyses vary; some suggest the puellae represent members of a courtesan class, possibly of Greek or other foreign origin, while others maintain that they are Roman women of high social standing, on par with the poets themselves.\(^\text{17}\)

The difficulty with the internal evidence is that it can often be interpreted in multiple ways. This ambiguity may have been intentional on the part of the elegists, whose writings could have been seen as subverting Augustan values. Among the positions argued, the most convincing assessment maintains that there is likely no single, straightforward classification of these women. Some of the figures individually may have been understood to be prostitutes, matronae, or something in between; some may have referenced real women, while others were creative fictions.\(^\text{18}\) Culturally, descriptions of the puellae appear to have paralleled women in several social categories, including those at the top of Rome’s citizen classes.

The contemporary complexities of female status and erotic experience alluded to in the figure of the puella are more plainly exposed in the writings of Sulpicia, the lone female elegist. Evidence from her poems indicates that, like her male counterparts, she was a member of the patrician class and moved in elite circles.\(^\text{19}\) Her few short works provide a vivid picture of the sexual tensions between two unwed members of the Roman aristocracy, recounting her illicit affair with the youth Cerinthus.\(^\text{20}\) Because of her status and her erotic disclosures, some scholars have argued that Sulpicia could not have been an historical figure but instead was an invention by another male poet.\(^\text{21}\) Yet whether autobiographical or fictional, the poems attributed to Sulpicia provide a narrative of the sexual self-determination that appears to have characterised the new Roman woman of the period.

Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria*, remarkable for its explicit descriptions of female sexual behaviour, offers further indications of the erotic engagement of elite women.\(^\text{22}\) The three-volume handbook provides detailed instruction on the arts of love and seduction, with the first two books addressing a male audience and the third dedicated to women. Much of Ovid’s material is

\(^{17}\) For a range of identifications, see James 2006; Luck 1974; Treggiari 1971; Stahl 1985, 28, 143-148.

\(^{18}\) The debate over the historicity of the puella continues. See most recently Miller 2013.

\(^{19}\) In poem 3.16.4, Sulpicia emphasises her elevated status in contrast to a potential rival, describing herself as the daughter of Servius. This Servius may have been the son of Servius Sulpicius, a friend of Cicero. Her uncle Messalla, who is addressed in poem 3.14, has been identified as Marcus Valerius Messalla Corvinus. For these identifications, see Skoie 2013, 84; Lyne 2007, 344-345.

\(^{20}\) It has been suggested that Cerinthus is a pseudonym for Caecilius Cornutus, a member of the patrician class and a figure often mentioned by Tibullus in his elegies. Although couched in poetic language, the relationship between the young couple is clearly sexual; Skoie 2013, 87.


\(^{22}\) For a commentary on the poem’s third book, see Gibson 2003. For single-volume commentaries on all three books, see Brandt 1902; Pianezzola et al. 1991. Gibson et al. 2006 is an important collection of essays on the *Ars*. See Myerowitz 1985 for a socio-cultural analysis.
striking in its sexual candour, especially that aimed at his female readership. Moreover, the relationships the narrator intends to facilitate are illicit, occurring outside the boundaries of sanctioned courtship and marriage.

The nature of this advice has led to speculation on the target female audience of the *Ars*. On the surface, the narrator appears to settle the issue unequivocally: several times in the text, he insists that his instructions are not intended for *matronae* but for courtesans, those legally permitted to be seduced by his male readers. However, these declarations come across as insincere, as the narrator also at times purposefully blurs the distinction between *matrona* and whore (*meretrix*). In point of fact, the poem’s fictive audience almost certainly varied from its actual audience, which included Rome’s noblewomen. The image of the *matrona* reading material that is too risqué for her respectable status appears some years later in Martial’s epigrams, implying that despite men’s best efforts, elite women engaged with and found resonance in a contemporary literary culture that included erotic scenarios.

Historical accounts of sexually uninhibited *matronae* indicate that the figure of the immodest Roman woman encountered in literary sources reflects something of an actual cultural phenomenon. A number of well-known women had their intimate lives recounted and caricatured by male historians and politicians. This includes Sempronia, the wife of the consul Decimus Junius Brutus, whose lustful pursuit of men is reported by Sallust. Cicero paints a similarly vivid picture of promiscuous Clodia, married to the consul Quintus Caecilius Metellus Celer. Besides her well-publicised affairs with Marcus Caelius Rufus and others, Cicero describes her as chasing after younger men. Augustus’ own daughter Julia and his granddaughter of the same name were both prosecuted and exiled from Rome in large part for their illicit relationships. Most if not all of these accounts were likely exaggerated for political reasons—the behaviour of women served as a convenient paradigm for the moral condition of the state. However, at the same time, these histories document both a shifting cultural environment in which “respectable” women were able to act on their erotic desires and a growing male anxiety in response to elite women embracing a confident sexual identity.

**Female pleasure and status in the visual arts**

Erotic illustrations of heterosexual couples, the types of images in which *catenae* frequently appear, formed an appreciable part of Roman visual culture (see Fig. 2). These generic *symplegma* scenes often share several traits. For one, the action typically occurs within a private, well-appointed domestic space, with luxurious textiles and furniture describing the

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23 This includes an account of sexual positions women can adopt to favour their physical features and advice on faking orgasms; Ov. *Ars am.* 3.769-788 and 3.798-801 respectively.  
24 Ov. *Ars am.* 1.30-34, 2.599-600, and 3.57-62.  
27 Mar. 3.68 and 3.86; McGinn 2004, 126-127.  
28 Sall. *Cat.* 25; McGushin (1977) offers a useful commentary in English; in German, see Vretska 1976. Sempronia features heavily in commentary on Sallust. For focused readings and extended bibliographies, see Boyd 1987; Paul 1985.  
29 Clodia has also been tentatively identified as Lesbia, the *puella* of the elegist Catullus. For an account of Clodia according to literary sources, see Wiseman 1985, 15-91.  
room as both upscale and intimate. Additionally, to enhance or embellish their nudity, female participants are often depicted wearing lavish jewellery.

Questions have been raised regarding the identity and status of the actors in these scenes, most especially the women. The majority of the female figures have been subsequently characterised as “wealthy courtesans”—a social category that seeks to explain the affluence encountered in the environment and on the female body, as well as the sexual exhibitionism of the women, which appears to risk no social impropriety.32

Such a universal identification, however, is untenable and often superficial. Over the last few decades, studies of ancient erotic art have become increasingly attuned to the variety of meanings and motivations expressed in these pictures.33 Besides arousing, scenes of lovemaking could be humorous, religious, apotropaic, a source of social commentary, or demonstrative of cosmopolitan taste. The intended function of the image naturally bears relation to any possible interpretation of the actors involved.

Moreover, erotic imagery, including *symplegma* scenes, occurs in a staggering array of contexts, high and low, public and private. Its ubiquity precludes a singular reading. Prior assessments often ignore the physical location and potential audience of these images—critical information which enables deeper, more substantive interpretation.34 New contextual analyses have led to an understanding of the nuances of such illustrations and the role of the viewer in constructing and establishing meaning.35

As a case study, a series of frescoes from the Augustan-period Villa of the Farnesina aptly shows the importance of context in reading erotic imagery and challenges the broad classification of the women in these images as courtesans. Wall paintings from two small, opposite-facing rooms present various compositions of a man and woman positioned on a bed.36 Three of these surviving scenes are merely suggestive;37 a clothed woman and nude man leisurely enjoy the sensual intimacy that precedes lovemaking, their body language signalling the sexual desire that is about to find expression. In another panel, the erotic tension has clearly been broken; the woman passionately and aggressively embraces her partner, loosening the drapery of her garment and bearing her breasts.38 All together these depictions have been previously described as representing two separate couples: one featuring a new and hesitant bride,

32 In part, this designation derives from Brendel’s argument for the origin of such scenes: Hellenistic sex handbooks that were ascribed to fictive Greek prostitutes. These were sometimes illustrated, meaning that images of the couples may have been understood to be depictions of the author and her client; Brendel 1970, 64-67. For a discussion of the handbooks, see Parker 1992, 92-94.

33 Several important examples: Johns (1982) makes the critical distinction between mythological and non-mythological subjects in erotica; Keuls (1985) examines power dynamics and sex in Greek art; Clarke’s work on Roman art remains foundational in scope, methodology, and analysis; Clarke 1998; 2003. More recently, Vout (2013) discusses a range of themes in Greek and Roman erotic imagery.

34 Clarke 1998, 11.

35 E.g. Clarke 1998, 196-206; Levin-Richardson 2019, 64-80. For a strongly theoretical approach, see Frederick 1995.

36 Both rooms (*cubiculum* B and *cubiculum* D) featured similar late Second-Style programmes replicating an elite picture gallery (*pinacoteca*). The series is incomplete as excavators were unable to save all of the panels from the rooms. Clarke (1998, 94-100) provides a discussion of the preserved scenes and the decorative scheme of the *cubicula*.

37 Two panels are from *cubiculum* B, one from *cubiculum* D. National Roman Museum, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme inv. nos. 1128, 1127, 1188.

38 From *cubiculum* D. National Roman Museum, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme inv. no. 1188.
the other an experienced and eager prostitute—an interpretation heavily reliant on flawed notions of female status and sexual enthusiasm.

The provenance of the paintings proves to be critical to their interpretation. The luxury estate has been tentatively identified as the living quarters built for Augustus’ daughter Julia at the time of her marriage to Agrippa. Furthermore, the rooms in which the panels were found featured bed alcoves, indicating their use as cubicula, relatively private spaces within the home used for sleeping, sex, and conducting business. Situating the scenes more fully within this context, John Clarke makes the convincing argument that the series in fact depicts erotic moments shared between a single couple, a husband and wife. The panels’ theme of marital intimacy situated in an affluent environment would have been highly relevant under these particular circumstances, invoking both the villa owners’ patrician status as well as their new union. The identification of the female figure as a matrona rather than a courtesan demonstrates that the sexual desire of respectable married women was appreciable and confirms that in erotic scenarios, female passion does not unequivocally indicate low or immoral status.

Catenae in the archaeological record: Moregine and Oplontis B

Catenae recovered from the Vesuvian sites of Moregine and Oplontis B present an important opportunity to examine body chains within their full archaeological context. The provenance of the chains and their associated assemblages yield insight into the status of the real women who wore catenae, offering a potential link between evidence gleaned from textual and visual sources and extant physical objects.

Moregine

In 2000, excavations at Moregine (Murecine), an area south of Pompeii, revealed a multi-storied inn (caupona). Included in the rubble were the remains of a woman around age thirty, an older woman approximately forty years old, and three children. The younger adult female was found wearing two gold snake-shaped bracelets, a plain gold ring, and the remnants of a gold chain necklace. She also carried a bag that contained three coins and several pieces of fine gold jewellery, including three additional bracelets, a chain necklace with a crescent pendant, two rings, one set with an intaglio gem depicting Cupid, and a catena (FIG. 3). Subsequent studies of the jewellery have focused in large part on a rare dedicatory inscription.
engraved on one of her snake bracelets: Dom(i)nus. ancillae. suae. “From the master to his slave girl.”

The meaning of this unusual phrase has been debated since the discovery of the jewellery. Some take the dedication at face value, insisting that the bracelet was a gift from a master to his slave,48 while others associate the line with a common trope in love elegy that describes the poet as a slave to love (servus amoris).49 Many of these readings see the inscription as affectionate in nature, characterising the bracelet as a love token.50

Pier Giovanni Guzzo and Vincenzo Scarano Ussani have proposed a different scenario based on the other objects in the assemblage. They note an erotic theme to the parure from the presence of the catena and the ring with the Cupid intaglio. This combined with the dedication has led them to argue that the woman likely worked as a prostitute and that her jewellery collection, either whole or in part, represents a peculium: property gifted to a slave by her master, or wealth earned by the slave, which her master permitted her to own.51

Guzzo and Scarano Ussani’s analysis of the Moregine evidence is compelling. Although women of free status could work as prostitutes,52 textual evidence indicates that sex workers were often slaves.53 The master referenced in the inscription may have been the woman’s pimp (leno), who sold her body as a source of income. Some of the Moregine jewellery, including the bracelet and catena, could have been given or lent to the woman by her master to use in her interactions with clients. Likewise, she may have been able to purchase some of the pieces herself as a further investment in her business. Although details of the woman’s status cannot be definitively confirmed, the discovery of a catena in this context strongly suggests that lower classes of women, including prostitutes and slaves, may have owned or at least worn gold body chains within certain occupational contexts. In such a scenario, the erotic overtones of the catena would have made it a highly relevant dress form.

Oplontis B

In contrast to the finds at Moregine, two catenae recovered from Oplontis B suggest a very different social category for their owner. At the residential and industrial complex, situated northwest of Pompeii, the bodies of fifty-four people were recovered in room 10, a vaulted storeroom used for the bottling and distribution of local wine.54 Excavations during the 1984-1985 field season revealed an impressive group of coins and jewellery linked to a single individual, Skeleton 27.55

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49 Baird 2015, 168. For a discussion on the use of the term by the elegists, see Copley 1947, 290-300.
50 Baird (2015, 166) reflects on the modern tendency to romanticise such relationships.
52 Studies on gender and occupation in Rome show that women had limited options for work, likely leading many to enter into prostitution; McGinn 2004, 61-71.
53 McGinn 2004, 59. For a more theoretical approach to the question of Roman slavery and prostitution, see Flemming 1999, 56-61. Another possibility is that the woman was a former slave who turned to (or remained in) prostitution once she was freed; Treggiari 1971, 197.
54 The site was previously misidentified as a villa and is often referred to in prior scholarship as Villa B. For the most recent assessments of the site, see Gazda, Clarke 2016.
55 D’Ambrosio 1987, 176.
The body has been identified as that of a young woman, aged twenty to twenty-five, who was in the final stages of pregnancy at the time of her death. The items associated with her represent substantial personal assets, including a number of coins totalling 11,000 sesterces, one of the largest collections of portable wealth found in the Vesuvian region. She also had many pieces of gold jewellery stored in a wooden box and a cloth bag, including three finger rings, a wire earring, a pair of bar pendant pearl earrings, a pair of ball earrings, a chain necklace with a crescent pendant, a gold and emerald bead necklace, fragments of an armlet, and a catena (FIG. 4). On her body, the woman wore a gold foil bracelet impressed with the image of Venus Pompeiana, and another catena, which was draped around her neck (FIG. 5).56

The collection on the whole appears to represent the general household wealth of a well-to-do member of Roman society. It is difficult to locate any sensual overtones to Skeleton 27’s parure like that ascribed to the Moregine assemblage; besides the catenae, the only other reference to Venus (the foil bracelet) likely reflects an affiliation with a local patron goddess rather than erotic messaging.57

Furthermore, the woman’s pregnancy may be an indication that she was married.58 Such a determination relies on social ideals of the period and should not be read as absolute proof of status; however, to be sure, pregnancy was a dangerous and undesirable condition for women outside of marriage and was likely avoided if possible.59 While her exact social class cannot be reconstructed (whether she was a freeborn matrona or a wealthy freedwoman), her pregnancy and her valuables potentially identify her as the wife of the Oplontis B proprietor or a nearby landowner.60

The inclusion of two body chains in the collection, which also features other popular, luxury jewellery forms, points to the use of catenae by fashionable, “respectable” Roman women. Additionally, the fact that one of the body chains was hastily wrapped around her neck suggests that the item may not have been stored away with the rest of the jewellery but was easily accessible and perhaps recently worn—an interesting consideration given the woman’s advanced state of pregnancy.61

Conclusions

Textual and visual evidence from the Augustan age roughly contemporary with the Vesuvian catenae indicates that these chains were worn during a unique cultural moment in which female sexual expression appears to have found agency within new social groups. The erotic

56 Ward 2016, 174-175; Roberts 2013, 293-294.
57 Ward (2016, 176) suggests the foil bracelet form may be linked to age or parental or marital status. See also, Ward, this volume.
59 This is especially true for women working in the sex trade; James 2003, 173-183. The use of abortion to end unwanted pregnancies is attested to in a number of Roman sources, including two elegies by Ovid, who writes of his mistress Corinna’s illness after undergoing the procedure; Ov. Am. 2.13, 2.14. Contraceptives of varying efficacy are also in evidence; Hopkins 1965.
60 The coins found with Skeleton 27 have also been read as an indication that the woman herself may have been the proprietor of Oplontis B; Gazda, Clarke 2016, 247.
61 It is likely that the woman draped the catena around her neck in haste, rather than putting it on as it was designed to be worn. Perhaps as further evidence of panic, the jewellery in the box and bag do not appear to have been carefully chosen; Roberts 2013, 294.
connotations of the body chain seem to have gained relevance across social strata, as women of varying status found themselves with the opportunity and incentive to eroticise their bodies by adorning themselves with catenae, a fact suggested by the archaeological contexts of the Oplontis and Moregine chains. The use of catenae by both “respectable” and “non-respectable” women is remarkable for several reasons.

Foremost, in a society that sought to make women of differing status (economic, familial, moral) distinguishable through dress, there appears to have been no anxiety over the shared use of this symbolic form. The apparent fact that high ranking Roman women and women of low occupation wore catenae without evidence of conflict indicates that both groups (if they could be so easily divided) were equally invested in advertising and performing a sexualised identity.

Additionally, women from various backgrounds likely shared many reasons for wearing erotically-charged jewellery. The cultivation and enhancement of a woman’s sexual appeal was not a superficial undertaking—it was an important strategy. Attracting and maintaining male sexual interest was critical for women in many social positions, both high and low, married and unmarried. Doing so could ensure domestic stability, the protection of one’s children, and economic security in a world where women were still heavily reliant on men for financial and domestic support. These motivations would have applied just as much to aristocratic women hoping to cultivate and sustain their position within the social hierarchy, as to sex workers hoping to ensure a steady source of income.

As such, the catena can be read as a kind of tool with which Roman women could enact a degree of control over their own lives. Performing an erotic identity allowed them to navigate the social landscape in a way that perhaps they were unable to before this brief cultural shift. Evidence for the use of these chains reveals a degree of shared experience and incentive among women, even across the wide gulf of social class and moral status.

How long body chains were used by women in this symbolic manner is uncertain. Although this moment of female sexual autonomy appears to have been short-lived, gold catenae continued to be produced and worn over the following centuries. Two later examples, one from the Hoxne hoard and another attributed to the Assiut Hoard, testify to the use of this form in the late Roman and Byzantine periods respectively. Contemporaneous illustrations of catena-clad Venuses and nude women likewise suggest that the chains managed to retain some of their iconographical associations into the final stages of the Empire. However, if such erotic connotations persisted over time, how the wearing of body chains found expression within the emerging Christian environment is yet to be fully understood.

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64 For example, the fourth-century Low Ham mosaic in England depicts Venus wearing a catena. A body chain is also lightly chased onto the nude figure of a bathing woman on a late-antique, silver situla attributed to Herculaneum; National Archaeological Museum, Naples inv. no. 25289.
65 Johns’s proposal that the Hoxne chain may have served as bridal jewellery is an attractive solution; Johns 2010, 27. Further evidence is needed, however, to confirm if other late catenae were used for this purpose, or if the form’s cultural overtones and contexts evolved over time.
Addendum: Response to Ria Berg (this volume)

In her article in this volume on the jewellery recovered from the bars and inns of Pompeii, Ria Berg argues that gold body chains (catenae), alongside anklets and bracelets, signalled sub-elite identities linked to hospitality and possibly prostitution. Her determinations are based in large part on the erotic connotations of the chains, a fact I also note in my analysis of the Vesuvian catenae, in addition to archaeological and literary evidence. This interpretation is part of B.’s broader proposal for ideal sets of jewellery (Venerean vs. Junonian, as she classifies them), which she connects to social identities and respectability. I will limit myself here to comments relating to B.’s assessment of body chains, since that is the primary point where we differ in opinion.

B. and I are in agreement on several topics with regards to Roman catenae and the interpretation of jewellery in general. In particular, her insistence on moving beyond the unsatisfactory formula equating gold with elite individuals and bronze with sub-elite individuals is notable and makes a convincing case for the complexities underlying adornment and female status in the early Imperial period. The assemblages of jewellery discovered in cauponae and other popular venues in Pompeii certainly speak to this point, and I agree with B. that not all of the fine jewellery from these contexts should be read as products of theft or looting; as she argues, “there is no valid reason for considering a priori that they would all represent last-minute chaos and disorder during the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD.” Correspondingly, I believe that B. and other scholars are correct in suggesting that the gold body chain from Moregine may have belonged to a woman who worked in the sex trade, as indicated by the location of the find and the other objects (e.g. the inscribed bracelet) associated with the catena. However, while the Moregine evidence does signal the use of catenae by sub-elite individuals, it does not by default exclude their use by alternative categories of Roman women. B.’s focus on the chain(s) found in cauponae is ultimately too narrow and overlooks other Vesuvian catenae with recorded provenance. None of these body chains has a contextual link to hospitality or prostitution; moreover, several of the catenae, such as those from Oplontis and Boscoreale, were recovered from contexts and assemblages that conversely indicate their place in the parures and household wealth of high status, socially-reputable women.

The written sources cited by B. in support of the connection between body chains and prostitutes are also problematic in my view. The only apparent description of a body chain comes from Pliny the Elder’s Natural History, in which the author notes that women wear “[gold] chains running around their sides” (discurrant catenae circa latera). The word catena in this passage translates simply as “chain,” but the term has been subsequently adopted by modern art historians and archaeologists as a descriptive title for the Roman body chain;

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66 I wish to thank Ria Berg for a rewarding discussion on the topic of the Vesuvian body chains and the women who wore them.
67 Berg, in this volume.
69 In her analysis, Berg includes the partial chain from the caupona of Masculus. I leave this example out of my assessment due to its fragmentary condition, which makes it impossible to confirm as a catena. See n. 12 above.
70 D’Ambrosio 1987; Roberts 2013, 293-294; Ward 2016, 174-175.
71 De Villefosse 1899; Casale 1979; Baratte 1986.
72 Plin. HN 33.12. Even Pliny’s description is vague and challenging to translate clearly.
there is no evidence that the body chain was uniquely known as a *catena* in this period, or otherwise carried a specific name. This lack of precise terminology makes it difficult to link literary accounts with extant artefacts. Furthermore, the Vesuvian *catenae* date to a period when chain jewellery was broadly popular and produced in a range of styles, from short, choker-length necklaces to torso-crossing bandoliers. Any mention of a chain necklace, necklace, or even a long chain (and most certainly gilded nipples) is too ambiguous to be read as a direct reference to a body chain and may allude to any number of chain jewellery forms, which remained in fashion over several centuries.

There is also an inherent uncertainty underlying literary accounts of ideal or moralising dress forms. As Kelly Olson has shown in her studies of dress and Roman women, with such evidence there often appears to be a discrepancy between ideal and actual practice. While many texts seem to support conservative adornment for *matronae*, other writings likewise describe the use of extravagant jewellery by Rome’s noblewomen, alongside other clothing deemed unseemly or unsavoury. This would indicate that prescriptive dress codes were often ignored or may have been considered symbolic rather than practical. That being said, I agree with B.’s conclusion that wearing overtly erotic jewellery could have exposed one to social criticism and that the “choice of jewellery may thus have been a question constantly open to debate, a daily act of identity creation and negotiation.” However, how high the stakes may have been is not clear, particularly when it seems that enough elite women were subverting sartorial rules to elicit complaints from male authors.

In summary, while the Moregine jewellery is significant evidence for the use of gold body chains by lower-status women working in hospitality and/or prostitution, there is insufficient proof (literary or archaeological) to categorically tie the jewellery form to these sub-elite occupations. To the contrary, other excavated Vesuvian *catenae* affirm the ownership of body chains by high-ranking, otherwise “respectable” Roman women. The broad appeal and apparent fluidity of the *catena* across social hierarchies challenge imprecise frameworks that associate female erotic expression with low economic or moral class, revealing instead a more varied and nuanced interplay between female social and sexual identities in the early Imperial period.

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73 The later term *ornamentum mammillarum* appears in Justinian’s *Digest* (Dig. 34.2.32) and has been read as “body chain.” (See Berg, this volume, n. 35. Sometimes it is alternately translated as “brooch.”) Watson 1985, 155.

74 For various examples, see Stefanelli 1992, nos. 37, 39-41, 45, 46, 89, 118, 136, 222, 238-240.

75 Olson 2008, 40-41; 113-114.

76 For Roman attitudes toward women and adornment, see Olson 2008, 80-95.

77 Berg, this volume.

78 Texts describing the use of *vestes coae* serve as an effective parallel; like the *catenae*, these articles combined messages of feminine sensuality and material expense. Several authors comment on the use of revealing silk garments by high status, sometimes married women, Plin. *HN* 6.20; Sen. *Controv.* 2.7; Sen. *Ben.* 7.9.5. Seneca the Younger also praises his mother Helvia for never wearing such clothing, implying its adoption by other women of similar social standing; Sen. *Helv.* 16.4. See also n. 14 above.
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Fig. 1 – Fresco. House of Mars and Venus (VII.9.47), Pompeii. National Archaeological Museum, Naples, inv. no. 9248. Photo: Carole Raddato, CC BY-SA 2.0, Wikimedia Commons.

Fig. 2 – Bronze mirror back. Esquiline Hill, Rome. Antiquarium Comunale, inv. no. 13694. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

Fig. 3 – Catena. Building 2, Moregine. Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei, inv. no. 85189. Photo: Guzzo 2003, 179, Fig. 10.
FIG. 4 – *Catena*. Room 10, Oplontis B. Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei, inv. no. 3411. Photo: Stefanelli 1992, 140, Fig. 130. Courtesy of L’Erma di Bretschneider.

FIG. 5 – *Catena*. Room 10, Oplontis B. Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompei, inv. no. 3410. Photo: Stefanelli 1992, 141, Fig. 131. Courtesy of L’Erma di Bretschneider.