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Rethinking the ‘Spectrum of Luxury’: Roman jewellery from the Bay of Naples

Abstract

Roman jewellery is often seen as a clear marker of wealth and luxury. While jewellery is often classified and analysed as a single class and with an emphasis on pieces composed of gold and other precious materials, it is only when we start to look at the differences between individual objects that we can get a more nuanced understanding of this material culture and its role in Roman society and culture. Undoubtedly there was a market for comparable forms of jewellery for women from different socio-economic backgrounds to display similar aspects of their identities but within their own budgets (e.g., young, (presumably) married mothers-to-be). It is only by considering the ‘spectrum of luxury’ that we can highlight how differences in quality and design reveal important choices behind the use of particular items of jewellery or packages of personal adornment. In other words, we should be cautious of grouping all jewellery together and under the simple label of ‘luxury.’ Not all gold jewellery, for example, was created equal.

Introduction

Jewellery seems to be inextricably linked with ideas of wealth and luxury, particularly as most studies of Roman jewellery focus on objects composed of gold and precious gems. Its luxury status, and by extension its cost, seems to derive principally from the raw materials used. This is perhaps best exemplified by the pearl, which was used to decorate Roman earrings and which Pliny the Elder specifically states was the most valuable product from the sea. The value of pearls in fact was sufficient that the sale of a single pearl from a woman’s earring was enough to save the livelihood (and often life) of her husband. Indeed, the value of jewellery as portable wealth is evident from the number of individuals fleeing the eruption

1 Cf. Berg 2002, 15: “jewellery and other adornments made of precious substances have their very raison d’être in indicating wealth.”
2 Nat. Hist. 9.54, 37.16. In addition, Pliny (Nat. Hist. 11.50.136) lamented that women spent “more money on their ears in pearl earrings, than on any other part of their person.”
3 Suetonius (Vit. 7), for example, stated that Vitellius was able to defray the cost of his travel to lower Germany by pawning a single pearl from his mother’s ear. Perhaps the most famous description of a woman selling her jewellery and pearls for the sake of her husband is the late-first-century BC Laudatio Turiae (ILS 8393); however, there are many other similar occurrences recorded in ancient literary sources (e.g., Petr. Satyr. 76; App. Bell. Civ. 4.39).
of Vesuvius on the Bay of Naples (AD 79) who carried bags and boxes of jewellery, often alongside coins.\(^4\)

While jewellery therefore can justifiably personify Roman luxury in certain cases, it is important to remember that it was also worn by people in a wide spectrum of society, including those from lower classes and slaves.\(^5\) There would have been a large amount of jewellery in less expensive and more ephemeral materials, such as bone, wood, and textile, that does not survive. Moreover, Berry’s study of jewellery from Regio I in Pompeii, for example, shows that finger-rings (including those of gold) were found equally in small- and medium-sized units, and different materials were spread across middling and elite classes.\(^6\) Indeed, it was the fact that jewellery was not restricted to the wealthy and that women of lower classes could wear gold jewellery that secured Pliny the Elder’s disapproval: “are even their feet to be shod with gold, and shall gold create an ordo of female equites between the stola and the plebs.”\(^7\) Ownership of gems and gold was in Pliny’s view not meant to cross boundaries of class or economic status.

Undoubtedly there was a market for comparable forms of jewellery for women from different socio-economic backgrounds to display similar aspects of their identities but within their own budgets. Several options were available to these women, including the use of ‘costume’ pieces or lower quality pieces in precious materials. In fact, surviving examples of jewellery from the Roman world show a great difference in materials used, intricacy of design, and the quality of craftsmanship. Indeed, it is also apparent that individual tasks or techniques used in the creation of different forms of Roman jewellery varied in terms of the requisite skill and execution. Engraved gems and stones, for instance, called for delicacy of touch and accuracy of eye in a higher degree than in other aspects of jewellery production, such as shaping gold wire into hoops or sheet gold into hemisphere earrings. Nonetheless, even these engravings could have been executed poorly or well. Similarly, there are objects of adornment that reveal extraordinary levels of craftsmanship, requiring additional skill and time to create and with some pieces passing through the hands of multiple craftsmen. High-end objects created by several craftsmen, especially if individual specialists were involved (e.g., goldsmiths, gemcutters, engravers, and stone setters), were likely not only to have been executed to a higher standard but also to have cost more.\(^8\) Moreover, different materials (e.g., gold, silver, bronze) and techniques (e.g., gnurling, setting stones, polishing, engraving) generally required different amounts of labour and/or specialist skill, which could have been employed to varying degrees of quality or finish. This meant that even seemingly wealthy items of a type often classed together (e.g., ‘gold bracelets’) would have varied greatly in quality and in cost.

\(^{4}\)Ward 2014.  
\(^{5}\)For a discussion of a gold armilla (Parco Archeologico di Pompei (PAP) inv. no. 81580) with the inscription DOM(IN)US ANCILLAE SUAE (master to his slave girl) and various interpretations, see Baird 2015, 164-170 and Ward 2021, 102, n. 48 with bibliography.  
\(^{6}\)Berry 1997, 169ff.  
\(^{7}\)Pliny the Elder Nat. Hist., 33.40: “etiamne pedibus induetur atque inter stolam plebemque hunc medium feminarum equestrem ordinem faciet?”  
\(^{8}\)i.e., gemcutter (cabator/ cavator), CIL VI.9239; engraver (caelator), CIL VI.4328; engraver or carver of gems (gemmarius sculptor), CIL VI.9436; pearl setter (margaritarius/-a) CIL VI.9544. The difference in price due to intricacy is noted in the Diocletian’s Price Edict (28.7), see below.
In other words, we should be cautious of grouping all jewellery together and under the simple label of ‘luxury.’ Not all gold jewellery, for example, was created equal. This can be seen in Petronius’s satire, where he describes how Fortunata, the wife of Trimalchio, took off her gold jewellery, weighing six and a half pounds, so that another guest could examine and admire it properly; scales were even sent for so that the weight of this gold jewellery could be proven.⁹ The point here, in addition to exposing Trimalchio’s vulgarity, is that weight and quality of craftsmanship could be ‘examined’ and used to distinguish Fortunata’s jewellery from other, presumably similar but less impressive, pieces.

While variety in material, quality, and craftsmanship would have allowed individuals from wider socio-economic backgrounds to obtain adornment in precious materials, its distribution was still limited. In the Bay of Naples, for example, the percentage of individuals whose skeletal remains were found with jewellery in precious materials indicates that such adornment was worn by only a small portion of the entire population: c. 9% at Pompeii and Herculaneum, c. 14% in the suburbs of Pompeii, and c. 17% at Oplontis.¹⁰ Perhaps then while jewellery in precious materials can be seen as an indicator of ‘luxury’ and the purview of only a segment of the ancient Roman population, it should still be viewed along a ‘spectrum’ with the highest end represented by regal jewels, such as Cleopatra’s famous pearl earrings, and the lowest by the thin gold-foil hemisphere earrings of a fugitive from Herculaneum.

A more nuanced reading of the surviving evidence, moving beyond simple connections between jewellery in precious materials and ‘luxury,’ is therefore required to better understand the variety within similar forms of gold adornment and the role of gold jewellery in creating and displaying similar identities across socio-economic boundaries. To this end, this article will consider what attributes contributed to the placement of individual articles of jewellery on the ‘spectrum of luxury.’ This will culminate in a discussion of the jewellery assemblages discovered with the skeletal remains of two young women from the Bay of Naples, each of whom carried similar cultural packages of adornment but on different points of the ‘luxury spectrum.’

**Jewellery in precious materials and the ‘spectrum of luxury’**

As noted above, jewellery in precious materials was worn by a small portion of the overall population, securing its classification as a luxury item. Yet, within this categorisation there is still a need to contextualise items of adornment in such a way that accounts for the nuances and complexities of various grades of luxury from bespoke or high-end pieces to more accessible or everyday items. This will allow for the contextualisation of individual pieces within a wider understanding of ‘luxury’ and the social function of jewellery.

Undoubtedly, individual items of personal adornment (and their raw materials) held specific monetary values. Equally, other forms of adornment, such as silks, textiles, and other

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⁹ Sat. 67.
¹⁰ However, the reality is probably more complex, as jewellery would have been more widely spread. The items of adornment found alongside skeletal remains represent what these individuals wore on one particular day, it does not necessarily represent everything that they owned. In addition, it is difficult to determine whether the jewellery found in bags and boxes with skeletal remains (not included in these statistics) belonged to one or more individuals within a household. Moreover, it is important to note that the jewellery found with skeletal remains represents less than 10% of all the jewellery found at Pompeii and Herculaneum; Ward 2014, appendix 3.
ephemeral material that does not survive, could have greatly added to the overall adornment of an individual, in some cases exceeding items of jewellery in cost and luxury. While ancient viewers might have been well versed in jewellery prices or at least the relative cost of a piece of jewellery or fine clothing, we only have a handful of prices given in ancient sources. Moreover, those that are recorded are generally given as extremes to make a point or values associated with pawnbrokers that are confused by issues of interest, low valuations, and multiple items used as security for a particular sum. Pliny the Elder, for example, disparaged Lollia Paulina, a senior member of the Roman nobility who was briefly married to the emperor Caligula in AD 38, for attending an ordinary betrothal party inappropriately adorned in emeralds and pearls worth 40 million sestertii: “I saw Lollia Paulina, not at some solemn ceremonial celebration, but at an ordinary betrothal banquet. She was covered with emeralds and pearls alternatively interlaced and shining all over her head, hair, ears, neck, and fingers.” In imparting this, Pliny further noted that Lollia was ready at a moment’s notice to show her receipts as documentary proof of the purchase – displaying the same lack of taste as wealthy freedwomen, such as Petronius’s Fortunata.

In reality, even seemingly ‘luxury items’ must have varied greatly in terms of cost and price. Therefore, it is more productive to consider the various aspects that would have affected a piece’s monetary value rather than actual prices in order to assess the status of an object. These attributes, noted above, would have included the materials used, the quality of the material, the object’s weight, and the intricacy of design and craftsmanship; characteristics similar to those which were found to influence consumers of precious jewellery in the modern British market. To get a sense of these aspects, we can turn to ancient sources. The most readily obvious attribute of an object’s value is the material from which it was constructed. In Diocletian’s Price Edict (28.7) of AD 301, the maximum prices for goldwork were listed as 50 denarii per ounce for simple work and 80 denarii per ounce for more complex work. Ogden used contemporary gold prices to calculate that such prices would only allow a profit of 0.83% for basic goldwork and 1.33% for intricate work. In Roman Palestine, local Jewish sages also enforced religious sanctions on trade. The third-century AD honayot law dictated that a craftsman or tradesman could only add one-sixth to the original or production cost of a

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11 For the high cost and exoticism of silk, see Dalby 2000, 200. The value of silk can be surmised from Diocletian’s Prices Edict, where undyed white silk is listed as 12,000 denarii/pound (23.1-2) and fine-spun purple silk is 150,000 denarii/pound (24.1-1a), while gold is listed as 72,000 denarii/pound and silver is 6,000 denarii/pound. For a list of luxuries that demonstrated wealth, see Plautus Aul. 498-550.

12 In total Diocletian’s Prices Edict lists 26 garments in pure silk (22.12-15), wool (22.3), a mixture of both (22.8-11), and unidentified fibres.

13 i.e. Pliny (Nat. Hist. 37.21) relates that a senator, Nonius, was in possession of an opal ring reputedly worth 2,000,000 sesterces. In contrast, a third-century AD pawnbroker’s account from Roman Egypt lists armlets, anklets, a necklace, and a pendant along with bronze vessels as security for a 4,600 drachma debt; P.Mich. inv. 1950; Husselman 1961, 252-256. Smaller loans are also known. At Pompeii, a moneylender, Faustilla, took two earrings as a deposit on a 30 denarii loan; CIL IV.8203.

14 Pliny Nat. Hist. 9.58. Pliny suggests that this level of adornment would have been acceptable at a public festival or ceremonial event.


16 Ogden 1992, 58. It is worth noting that while these prices would have applied primarily to larger eastern cities, where Diocletian’s Prices Edict was circulated, trade regulation would have existed on a provincial level as well.
commodity without being accused of usury. These figures suggest that the raw material comprised almost the entire price of precious items, such as personal adornment. It should be noted, however, that additional costs for workmanship would have varied based on the type of material and the design undertaken.

A similar situation would have existed where the client provided raw materials to a jeweller before a commission. Much of the cost would have been either the purchase of raw materials, such as metal ingots or gemstones, or the melting down of out-of-date jewellery in their possession. An example of this type of commission can be observed in two late-second-century AD papyri. In the first papyrus, Menches, a goldsmith from Oxyrhynchos, sent two complaints to local officials that he was whipped by a rhabdophoros, who then stole a lump of silver and a necklace, weighing a total 108 drachmae, from him. In his second complaint, Menches stated that while the rhabdophoros was ordered to return his property, this had not happened yet and the owner of the silver that was under contract had been harassing Menches for his silver. In commissions of this type, the client not only would be able to stipulate the precise style and type of decoration but also would know the exact composition of what was in their jewellery, unless the craftsman was completely disreputable. Moreover, wealthy clients, such as the empress Livia, may have also kept slaves, trained as jewellers or gem-carvers. In such a situation, the patron would only have paid for the raw materials. However, as Joshel has noted, the majority of gem-carvers and jewellers would have laboured as private artisans in workshops in the marketplace.

While the majority of an object’s cost, therefore, derived from the raw materials used to make it, there were substances that could imitate more costly items. Ancient dealers were very skilled in creating fake gems, as can be seen from the Stockholm papyrus. The prospect of being deceived by jewellery dealers is also evident in Martial’s epigram on Mamurra.

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17 The idea of honaya (fraud) was derived by Rosenfeld and Menirav (2001, 363-363) from the Mishna, Tosefta, and Midrashim (literature of the Jewish sages).
18 This seems to have been true of most crafts produced in the Roman period. At that Baths of Caracalla in Rome, for example, roughly one-third of the entire cost was spent on materials and their transport; DeLaine 1997, 219.
19 Duncan-Jones, in his study on statuary from North Africa, used epigraphic evidence for the cost of a marble basin from Cirta to argue that workmanship comprised roughly 90% of the cost of a statue; Duncan-Jones 1982, n. 394 = CIL VIII. 6970. Claridge, (1988, 141, n. 7), however, noted that a statue would have taken much more skill and time to carve than a basin and therefore would have had a higher labour cost.
20 Rhabdophoroi seem to have been a type of official who may have been used in liturgical or security capacities; Bauschatz 2013, 154. On the identification of the official mentioned here as a rhabdophoros, see Bauschatz 2007, 20 n. 19.
22 Treggiari 1975, 55. In addition to the imperial family, Sergia Paullina possessed a goldsmith slave and Caecilia Metella a slave who was a silversmith; Joshel 1992, 73.
23 Joshel 1992, 73.
24 This could have been done either with or without the customer’s knowledge. In his discussion on stones, Pliny (Nat. Hist. 37) often gives methods of testing or verifying the authenticity of various gemstones, including sardonyx and emeralds.
25 In fact, it seems that many jewellers were skilled enough to fool even clients. A disparity in the legal texts demonstrates that even a client could mistake bronze jewellery for gold and the legal texts disagree as to whether the sale is still valid, since the composition of the piece had been agreed upon, or whether it was invalid because the material was falsified. Cf. Dig. Just. 18.1, quoted in Ogden 1990, 100.
26 Numerous recipes are given by the author for dyeing rock crystal with pigeon’s blood to create fake sardonyxes and a green stain to imitate emeralds, i.e. P. Holm. 14 and 32. Also see P. Holm 74 for the fabrication of the colouring with which to create fake emeralds.
where his protagonist had to search through every jewellery counter in Rome in order to find a genuine sardonyx.\textsuperscript{27} However, fake gemstones were not always intended as counterfeit gems and could also have been used as imitation gems in order to create a type of costume jewellery. The Pompeian workshop at I.11-9.15, where almost 400 glass paste gems were found, most likely represents a shop specialising in costume pieces.\textsuperscript{28}

Within a spectrum of luxury, therefore, certain materials must have been more valued than others, with pearls, diamonds, emeralds, and sapphires at the top and iron, glass, and glass paste at the bottom. Moreover, we must imagine that hierarchies existed within specific material categories. Pearls, for example, would have varied in price due to their source, size, colour, and whether they formed part of a pair. Pearls from Britain, for example, were smaller and duller than those from the East.\textsuperscript{29} The rarity of larger pearls and gemstones and the consequent additional cost are best displayed in the valuation of one of Cleopatra’s giant pearls at 10 million \textit{sestertii}.\textsuperscript{30} That the colour and clarity of a stone was important for its value is known from ancient literature. Pliny and Theophrastus, for example, specifically focused on colour, transparency, and clarity when detailing ancient gemstones.\textsuperscript{31}

In addition to the value of the material utilised in these pieces, craftsmanship would also have added or detracted from the worth of an item of adornment. For example, it is clear from Pliny that precious metals, such as gold and silver, were made more precious through engraving.\textsuperscript{32} In fact, in his discussion of gold finger-rings, Pliny noted that engraved rings would have held a greater value due to their craftsmanship than the price of an equivalent weight of gold.\textsuperscript{33} In the early Imperial period, craftsmanship could have accounted for dramatic increases in the value of luxury goods. For example, huge prices were paid in this period for silver plate crafted by famous artisans. Pliny noted that the orator, L. Crassus, paid 100,000 \textit{sestertii} for two goblets by the artist, Mentor, while C. Gracchus spent roughly 5,000 \textit{sestertii} per pound for several silver dolphins.\textsuperscript{34} Moreover, Pliny noted that no artist or manufacturer was in fashion for a prolonged period of time.\textsuperscript{35}

This value of craftsmanship was based on the effort, time, and skill that would have been required to produce the object, as well as the number of individuals involved in the process. Finger-rings set with intaglios, for example, would have required the involvement of several specialists, such as goldsmiths, gemcutters, engravers, and stone setters.\textsuperscript{36} Therefore, the number of tasks involved in the production of an individual item of jewellery, as well as the difficulty of these tasks and the skill with which they were carried out, need to be considered

\textsuperscript{27} Martial 9.59.
\textsuperscript{28} Cerato 2000, 124.
\textsuperscript{29} i.e. Tacitus Agr. 12; Pliny \textit{Nat. Hist.} 9.116; Flory 1988, 499.
\textsuperscript{30} Pliny \textit{Nat. Hist.} 9.58.
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Nat. Hist.} 33.4; Carey 2003, 107.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Nat. Hist.} 33.6.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Nat. Hist.} 33.53. Pliny goes on to give a list of the most famous artisans for silver plate in 33.55. This price is well above the 336 \textit{sestertii} price for a pound of raw silver; Crawford 1974, 594.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Nat. Hist.} 33.49.
\textsuperscript{36} The responsibility involved in the execution of these tasks would have increased with each stage. Those involved in the later stages, such as the craftsman involved in setting an intaglio, would have risked damaging the work of the goldsmith, the gemcutter, and the engraver should he have made a mistake. For the individual involved in setting pearls, which are friable in nature, into earrings and finger-rings, any error would have been costly indeed.
as more intricate and detailed pieces would have required more time, and therefore more cost, to produce.

Another factor that would have affected the placement of a particular item of jewellery on the spectrum of luxury is its weight. Material made of solid silver or gold would obviously have cost more than those that were hollow or constructed of metal foil. Ogden has suggested that gemstones, as well as precious metals, would have been sold by weight. That weight would have been a characteristic evident to ancient viewers is clear from ancient literary accounts. Pliny noted that some individuals made a great show of how weighty their finger-rings were, and Juvenal remarked upon the overly heavy rings of effete Romans. Martial even warned that heavy rings were liable to any number of accidents due to their weight. Moreover, in Petronius’ *Satyricon*, Scintilla and Fortunata compare the quality of their gold jewellery while their husbands, Habbinas and Trimalchio, discuss the weight of gold involved in the crafting of these pieces. As noted above, Trimalchio even goes so far as to call for a set of scales to prove the weight and consequent worth of both his and his wife’s adornments.

In addition to these accounts, ancient pawnbrokers’ receipts and dowry documents specifically described jewellery by their weight. Even when no description of the size or decoration was noted, the weight of the piece was carefully catalogued. This detail was likely due to the potential for substituting counterfeit items in the place of the original solid pieces. Pliny understood this potential and noted that real gemstones were often heavier, harder, and colder than their counterfeit counterparts. Unfortunately, the weight of certain items of jewellery could have been easily faked. Bracelets composed of gold foil, for example, were sometimes filled with wax or resin to provide more weight (and stability). While such measures can easily be identified in broken objects, this counterfeiting may be undetected in some cases. The importance of weight can be seen in two similar sets of gold finger-rings from Herculaneum. The first pair consisted of a gold-finger ring set with an intaglio (3.6 g, some 0.7 g heavier than the average for this ring type in the Vesuvian area) and a gold finger-ring with an incised bezel (7.9 g, considerably heavier than the average (c. 3.9 g) from this area). On the other hand, the second pair of gold finger-rings weighed 1.8 g and 1.7 g. It seems then that these two assemblages represent similar material cultural packages at different points on the spectrum of luxury.

While the characteristics noted in this section are undoubtedly subjective to a certain degree, they nonetheless give us a sense of the diversity that existed between objects of the same (and different) material and type. If we now turn to examine a single type of adornment – gold hemisphere bracelets – along these criteria, we can see how the successful application
of this approach provides a sense of the placement of these pieces within the ‘luxury spectrum.’ The first pair of bracelets, from Building A at Moregine, consisted of a single row of hemispheres created from simple gold foil (FIG. 1). A second pair of bracelets, this time from Arch 8 on the beachfront at Herculaneum, featured a second row of hemispheres and was created from more solid gold (FIG. 2). The higher level of craftsmanship required to create the extra row of hemispheres and the larger quantity of gold meant that this second bracelet would have held a higher place on the ‘luxury spectrum’ than the first pair of bracelets.

Moreover, it appears that even when poorer elements were used, craftsmanship and the presence of multiple materials equated to a higher level of luxury. This can be seen best when comparing the same pair of bracelets from Building A at Moregine with a pair from the Casa di Gratus (IX, 6, 5) at Pompeii (FIG. 3). Both pairs of bracelets are composed of a single strand of hemispheres, however, it would have taken more technical ability to craft the seemingly perfect hemispheres (in gilded bronze) and inset the glass gems of the latter bracelets than to construct the oblong elements of the former. The value of individual items of jewellery, therefore, was not solely reflected by the type or quality of material. The question arises as to whether the bronze bracelet would have been viewed as a piece composed of bronze and glass or as a more costly bracelet of solid gold and emerald. Would the individual wearing this bracelet have been associated with their actual economic means or that of the imitated materials? In the latter case, the socio-economic standing of the individual and the value of the bracelets would have been markedly different.

These comparisons demonstrate that even seemingly wealthy items of a type often classed together would have varied greatly. This suggests that there was a market for comparable forms of jewellery for women from different socio-economic backgrounds to display similar aspects of their identities but within their own budgets. Even if the bronze bracelets from the Casa di Gratus were judged on their actual composition, it is more than likely that they still would have cost more and been more valuable than their simple gold foil counterparts. While it is necessary to be cautious in asserting the values ancient consumers placed upon materials and craftsmanship, or to what extent one was valued over the other, it does seem clear that both were valued and contributed to the overall cost of an individual item of jewellery. Moreover, these characteristics can clearly be utilised to assess the relative placement of individual items of adornment on a relative spectrum of luxury.

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46 Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (MANN) inv. nos. 114317 and 114318.
47 PAE inv. nos. E3647 and E3648.
48 That craftsmanship had value regardless of the medium is suggested by the Digest, where it is stated that, “if a vase is made of stolen silver, then the value of making it must be added to the amount of the theft” (13.1.13).
49 MANN inv. nos. 118270 and 118271.
50 For a further discussion of the varying craftsmanship of hemisphere bracelets from the Bay of Naples and their meaning, see Ward 2014, 82-8. Schenke (2003, 47–51) used the same characteristics of craftsmanship and weight to identify these as anklets rather than bracelets. Berg (2019, 229-30) also recognises these pieces as anklets and associates them explicitly with the dress of courtesans and prostitutes. See also Berg, this volume.
51 That technical ability was valued is noted by Pliny, who stated that craftsmanship and the material used contributed equally to the value of finger-rings; Nat. Hist. 33.6.
Packages of adornment and young women at Oplontis and Pompeii

The evidence from the Bay of Naples suggests that women of all socio-economic backgrounds, if they could afford it, would have chosen gold as the predominant material for their adornment. Nonetheless, socio-economic status would have impacted the number of items of jewellery owned and their type. For example, the majority of individuals discovered with items of adornment from the Bay of Naples (66%) were found with a single piece of jewellery. In addition, necklaces are comparatively rare, most likely due to the high level of craftsmanship and gold needed in their production. Differences in value and placement on the spectrum of luxury would also have enabled items of the same type to be distinguished from one another. In this way, two or more women aspiring to own the same package, or suite, of jewellery could find pieces to fit both their budgets and their identities. This can be seen in the case of two young and likely married women from Oplontis and Pompeii. It seems that not only the material but also the package of adornment was important in creating and displaying similar identities across economic and social statuses.

At Oplontis, the remains of Skeleton 27, a young woman aged 20-25 years old, were discovered mixed with those of a foetus (Skeleton 27A). Analysis of the foetal remains indicated that the woman was in the final weeks of pregnancy at the time of the eruption. Due to the cultural and societal values of the Roman world, it could be assumed that a woman with a child was probably married. The woman identified as Skeleton 27 was found with a wooden box with a large amount of gold jewellery of varying construction and craftsmanship: two gold finger-rings with incised decorations, a gold double-headed snake finger-ring (Fig. 4), pieces of a gold bracelet, a gold wire earring, a pair of gold hemisphere earrings (Fig. 5), a pair of gold double pendant pearl earrings (Fig. 6), and three gold necklaces, one of which was adorned with nineteen emeralds. The pair of double pendant pearl earrings is the single most valuable item of jewellery discovered with skeletal remains in the Vesuvian area, even more valuable than an emerald, pearl, and gold lunula held by another woman (Skeleton 7), aged 25-35 years old, also from Oplontis. It is notable, however, that aside from the costly gold and pearl earrings and the gold and emerald necklace, the other items in the box were of lesser craftsmanship and simpler design. A similar range of craftsmanship can be seen on the items of gold jewellery that Skeleton 27 was wearing at the time of the eruption. Around her neck was a high-quality gold necklace with several long, fine chains, while on her
left arm was a gold bracelet of lesser quality and craftsmanship. The latter was constructed from gold sheet that was rolled and impressed with an image of Venus at her toilette (FIG. 7).

A similar package of adornment was found alongside the remains of a young woman (Skeleton 3B), between 16 and 20 years old, from the Casa di Giulio Polibio (IX.13.1-3) in Pompeii. This woman was also pregnant at the time of her death. She was found with five pieces of gold jewellery: a pair of gold earrings, a pair of gold bracelets, and two gold and gem finger-rings. The gold earrings found near the head of this woman are of hemisphere type and are constructed of gold foil. The gold bracelets, worn on either arm, were also constructed of gold foil that was folded inwards and then decorated with an embossed bezel depicting the Three Graces (FIG. 8). These construction techniques would have allowed the owner to wear gold jewellery that appeared more expensive than it actually was. The most costly items of jewellery in this assemblage were the two gold and gem finger-rings found near Skeleton 3B’s left hand. This would not have been due to the quality of their craftsmanship but rather because of the gems used in the intaglios: a carnelian and an amethyst.

The packages of adornment noted here seem to suggest the presence of a gender identity based upon marriage and motherhood, indicated by the age of the individuals and the presence of foetuses. Both women wore gold bracelets adorned with motifs depicting young, beautiful, and nubile goddesses (Venus at her toilette and the Three Graces). Moreover, both women were found with similar types of adornment – earrings, bracelets, and finger-rings – if we include the earrings and finger-rings found in the box with Skeleton 27. However, there is an immediately notable distinction in the craftsmanship and quality of these pieces. While the jewellery with these two women was composed of gold and had similar forms, the packages of adornment represent different points on the ‘luxury spectrum.’ These two assemblages seem to represent women with similar identities, that of young soon-to-be mothers from neighbouring settlements, who were likely married. What is certainly apparent is that forms of adornment were highly important in the creation and display of gender identities, while the use of varying qualities of craftsmanship and various materials helped to differentiate levels of wealth, luxury, and socio-economic status.

63 MANN inv. nos. 73410 and 73401, respectively. Gazda, Clarke 2016, cat. no. 184 (C. Ward) and cat. no. 185 (C. Ward); D’Ambrosio, De Carolis 1997, 65 no. 193 and 67 no. 201, respectively. While it is not possible to distinguish between bracelets and armbands in most instances, the lightweight construction of this example may suggest that it was intended for use on the upper arm.
66 PAP inv. no. 23875; D’Ambrosio, De Carolis 1997, 29 no. 15; Fergola 2003, 425.
68 PAP inv. no. 23876 and 23877, respectively; Castiglione Morelli 1982, 789ff.; D’Ambrosio, De Carolis 1997, 47 nos. 109 and 110; Fergola 2003, 425-246.
69 Cf. Ward 2021, 105-106.
Conclusions

While jewellery (especially that of precious materials) is often classified and analysed as a single class, it is only when we start to look at the differences between individual pieces or packages of adornment that we can get a more nuanced understanding of this material culture and its role in Roman society and culture. All jewellery in gold and other precious materials represented a degree of luxury; however, not every piece was the same. It is only by considering the spectrum of luxury that we can highlight how differences in quality and design reveal important choices behind the use of particular items of jewellery or packages of personal adornment.

Of course, the nature of the choices behind jewellery form and material is difficult to ascertain with certainty: it is possible that gold was chosen due to its relatively constant value, with jewellery serving a dual purpose of adornment and investment. It is equally possible, however, that the use of gold was due to an association between the material and certain female ideals and gender identities. In reality, it is likely that gold jewellery was both a signifier of wealth and a conscious social signifier. This is exemplified by the fact that in the Bay of Naples it was more common for women to choose poorer quality gold bracelets and necklaces over more impressive pieces in other materials. It was clearly better to be seen on the low end of the ‘luxury spectrum’ than not on it at all.

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Fig. 1 – Pair of gold foil hemisphere bracelets (MANN inv. nos. 114317 and 114318). Moregine, Building A, Stairs. From Guzzo 2003, 168.

Fig. 2 – Above: solid gold hemisphere bracelet (PAE inv. no. E3648). Below: reverse side of the same bracelet. Arch 8, Beachfront, Herculaneum. Photo: Courtney A. Ward, with permission of the Ministero della Cultura - Parco Archeologico di Ercolano.

FIG. 4 – Gold double-headed snake finger-ring found in a box next to skeleton 27 from Oplontis B: solid gold band with incised scales and glass paste eyes (MANN inv. no. 73403). Photo: courtesy of the Ministero della Cultura - Parco Archeologico di Pompei.

FIG. 5 – Hemispherical earrings of gold foil construction found in a box next to skeleton 27 from Oplontis B (MANN inv. no. 73408). Photo: courtesy of the Ministero della Cultura - Parco Archeologico di Pompei.
Fig. 6 – Pair of double pearl pendant earrings found in a box next to skeleton 27 from Oplontis B (MANN inv. no. 73407). Photo: courtesy of the Ministero della Cultura - Parco Archeologico di Pompei.

Fig. 7 – Gold bracelet discovered on the arm of skeleton 27 from Oplontis B and constructed from rolled gold sheet (MANN inv. no. 73401). Photo: Giorgio Albano, courtesy of the Ministero della Cultura - Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.

Fig. 8 – Gold bracelets found on the arms of skeleton P7. Room HH, Casa di Giulio Polibio, Pompeii (PAP inv. nos. 23878 and 23879). Photo: Luigi Spina, courtesy of the Ministero della Cultura - Parco Archeologico di Pompei.