

Identity, Trade, and Mobility in Ostia Antica¹

Ghislaine van der Ploeg

Vast amounts of people and goods arrived at Ostia. Among these were many people from Roman North Africa: it was with Africa that Ostia appeared to have the strongest commercial connections. This contribution examines the establishment of identity that took place when an individual came to Ostia, and how this was displayed. It does this by investigating an inscription set up by Lucius Caecilius Aemilianus, a veteran from the first praetorian cohort as well as a *decurio* and *duovir* in the city of Aelia Uluzibbira in Africa.

*L(ucius) Caecilius / Aemilianus / veteranus ex coh(orte) / pr(ima) praetoria decu / rio duovir Aeliae / Uluzibbirae Africae / corporatus in tem/plo fori vinari(i) impor / tatorum negotian/tium fecit sibi.*²

Aemilianus also enjoyed a commercial career in Ostia and was a member of the *corpus splendidissimum importatorum et negotiantium vinariorum*.³ Displaying the combination of these three facets of identity is unusual. The reason for this display was that these identities were highly interconnected: Aemilianus' former career aided him in his current commercial occupation in Ostia.

Aelia Uluzibbira was probably founded as a military colony under Hadrian and was located in Africa Proconsularis.⁴ Based on recruitment patterns and military traditions in North Africa, Aemilianus likely came from a military family; it had become common for the children of veterans also to pursue a military career. Being born into a military family would explain how Aemilianus gained his citizenship and how the praetorian guard recruited him. While veterans of the guard could remain in Rome after their period of service had ended, most returned to their places of origin.⁵ Aemilianus does not actually state in his inscription where he came from, but this veteran habit indicates that he came from Aelia Uluzibbira, as after his time in the praetorian guard he returned there and held the positions of *duovir* and *decurio*. Cébeillac-Gervasoni noted that there were many Africans who held important positions in Ostia.⁶

Aemilianus mentions that he was a member of an association of wine importers. African viticulture developed after the Roman expansion of the province in the 2nd century AD, and the region of Aelia Uluzibbira commonly produced wine.⁷ The consumption of wine started to develop further in an urban context during the Imperial period. Purcell notes that periods of rapid urban expansion, such as occurred in Ostia during the 2nd century AD, promoted a drinking culture.⁸ The Ostian wine *collegia* appear to have been mainly a 2nd century AD phenomenon. The reason for this may have been the increased demand for wine as well as the possibility to import greater quantities of wine due to increased production in the provinces.⁹

As Aelia Uluzibbira was a wine-producing region, it is possible that Aemilianus met wine producers while working in Proconsularis, which is why he placed such an emphasis on both his past and present offices in his inscription. He utilised his established, former contacts in order to facilitate the importation of wine to Ostia. Colossal-sized farms existed in Roman North Africa and Aemilianus only needed to negotiate with a few landowners in order to be able to import large quantities of wine.¹⁰ The trade and shipping connections with Africa are especially visible in the Piazzale delle Corporazioni in Ostia. Its *stationes* hosted traders from various cities, and helped form a social network and bridge for people coming from the provinces who wanted to live and work in Ostia. In a society without formal means of identification, this had to be established via social networks, especially those connected to one's place of origin.¹¹ The Africans who were already established in Ostia could vouch for a newcomer, facilitating his infiltration into Ostian society. At that time, ethnicity was the primary basis for the creation of these trade networks and was the springboard from which other networks could be created.¹² Aemilianus used his inscription for precisely the same purpose; although it was erected in Ostia, he used it to emphasise his African past. In doing so, he was not showing off his past in the Roman army or his status as an ex-official, but instead he used his past as a way of publicly demonstrating his trustworthiness. This dependability helped him to establish his identity in this new place which would, subsequently aid him in establishing new trade contacts and connections.

Notes

¹ A longer version of this article has been published in *AncSoc* 47, 2017, 221–236.

² *AE* 1940, 64.

³ Meiggs 1973, 275.

⁴ Terpstra 2013, 119 note 99.

⁵ Bingham 2013, 58 f.

⁶ Cébeillac-Gervasoni 1996, 559. 564.

⁷ Hobson 2015, 99; Redaelli 2013/2014, 28.

⁸ Purcell 1985, 15.

⁹ Unwin 2005, 123; Purcell 1985, 12.

¹⁰ Hobson 2015, 43; Sears 2011, 43; Shaw 1981, 57. See *CIL* VIII no. 10570.

¹¹ Moatti 2006, 117.

¹² Terpstra 2014, 123 f.

References

Bingham 2012

S. Bingham 2012, *The Praetorian Guard. A History of Rome's Elite Special Forces* (Waco 2012).

Cébeillac-Gervasoni 1996

M. Cébeillac-Gervasoni, *Gli 'Africani' ad Ostia ovvero 'Le Mani sulla città'*, in: C. Montepaone (ed.), *L'Incidenza dell'Antico*, Studi in memoria di E. Lepore 3 (Naples 1996) 557–567.

Hobson 2015

M. S. Hobson, *The African Boom. Evaluating Economic Growth in the Roman Province of Africa Proconsularis (146 BC – AD 439)* (Portsmouth 2015).

Meiggs 1973

R. Meiggs, *Roman Ostia* ²(Oxford 1973).

Moatti 2006

C. Moatti, *Translation, Migration and Communication in the Roman Empire. Three Aspects of Movement in History*, *ClAnt* 25, 1, 2006, 109–140.

Purcell 1985

N. Purcell, *Wine and Wealth in Ancient Italy*, *JRS* 75, 1985, 1–19.

Redaelli 2013/2014

D. Redaelli, *I veterani delle milizie urbane in Italia e nelle province di lingua Latina. Indagine storico-epigrafica* (PhD thesis, University of Trieste 2013/2014). <https://www.openstarts.units.it/dspace/bitstream/10077/11103/1/Redaelli_phd.pdf> (01.02.2019)

Sears 2011

G. Sears, *The Cities of Roman Africa* (Stroud 2011).

Shaw 1981

B. D. Shaw, *Rural Markets in North Africa and the Political Economy of the Roman Empire*, *AntAfr* 17, 1981, 37–83.

Terpstra 2013

T. T. Terpstra, *Trading Communities in the Roman World. A Micro-economic and Institutional Perspective* (Leiden 2013).

Terpstra 2014

T. T. Terpstra, *The "Piazzale delle Corporazioni" Reconsidered. The Architectural Context of its Change in Use*, *MEFRA* 126, 1, 2014, 119–130.

Unwin 2005

T. Unwin, *Wine and the Vine. An Historical Geography of Viticulture and the Wine Trade* (London 2005).