

The Aesthetics of Branding in Late Hellenistic Delos

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This paper addresses the aesthetics of branding in late Hellenistic Delos by focusing on the ways, in which the ambitious Italian merchant community employed religious practices as a means to promote their economic interests and assert their corporate identity, and how in doing so shaped the city's urban form.

The booming of religious associations in the Hellenistic period was propelled by the movement of populations and the ensuing new co-existences within poleis. The cultic communities of the religious associations became a means for the social integration of non-citizens in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the Hellenistic port cities. They offered a way into society through religious and social interaction. Even if the great majority of these associations were unrelated to commercial interests, it is clear that through networks built on interpersonal bonds that crossed the range of ethnic, geographical, occupational and cultic connections, they offered mercantile communities a means to establish themselves socially in the communities, in which they were active and further their economic interests.

Delos has yielded rich epigraphic evidence of different associations and groups that issued inscriptions from the third century BC to the second century AD, while most inscriptions date from the heyday of the free port from 167/166 to 88 BC.¹ While research has focused on the epigraphic evidence from public squares,² sanctuaries³ and private clubhouses,⁴ the role that domestic cults played in the emporium of Delos has not been addressed. The evidence for cult practices, in particular of the cult of Lares Compitales,⁵ shows that merchants employed the cult as a means to assert their corporate identity.⁶ In addition, recent research has indicated that the cult of Lares Compitales was intertwined with economic activities in the domestic sphere.⁷

The cult of the Lares Compitales exemplifies the ways, in which religious practices were employed by the predominant mercantile community on the island of Delos as a means of branding in the early Roman period. Italians closely intertwined their economic activities with the veneration of the cult; thus, employing the cult's religious network as an agent for the branding of their corporate identity in the context of the dynamic urban economy of the island in this period. While the monument of the Lares Compitales in the Agora of Hermaistai or Competaliastai marked the presence of the Italian community at the heart of the Delian emporium the paintings of the Lares Compitales at the entrance of the Italian houses, which housed the economic activities of the Italian community, linked this economic activity with the locus of the Delian emporium, where the monument of the Lares Compitales stood and where the veneration of these deities as well as the games in their honor took place once a year. In establishing this link, the Italian community made a strong statement in both the sprawling urban economy of the island and at the core of the wholesale trade of the emporium of Delos.

Notes

- ¹ Bruneau 1970, 585–638.
² Hasenohr 2000; Hasenohr 2001.
³ Roussel 1987, 253–255; Bruneau 1970, 464 f. 471 f.; Baslez 1977, 197–203. 249–268; Will 1985.
⁴ Trümper 2002; Trümper 2006; Trümper 2008; Trümper 2011.
⁵ Hasenohr 2003, 194–211. 219–223; Hasenohr 2007; Flower 2017, 175–191.
⁶ Zarmakoupi 2015.
⁷ Zarmakoupi 2015 and 2022.

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