

Royal Foundations and the Economy of Hellenistic Asia Minor (3rd–2nd centuries BCE). The Case of Alexandria Troas

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The foundation of new communities throughout the Near East during the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE by royal initiative is one of the most remarkable policies distinguishing the Hellenistic kingdoms from their predecessors. Most notably, it seems that *synoicism* – the practice of conglomerating smaller communities into larger urban centres – had served as one of the chief methods of facing Athenian and Spartan imperialism in the past. However, in this arising system of competing kingdoms, new *poleis* formed the backbone of the kingdoms' development.¹ In this light, research on the subject has emphasised the political and military importance of the phenomenon and approaches are needed to open up other sides and effects of these urbanisation projects, such as the economic aspect.

In this direction, this paper is an effort to gain some insight into the economic impact of royal foundations and aims to present the progress of my research on the following question: how did new settlements in Asia Minor influence the cross-regional trade networks through which people travelled and conducted trade?

Naturally, because evidence is very unevenly distributed both in terms of chronology and geography, the core of my approach is constituted of case studies. Here I present the case of Alexandria Troas, a *polis* founded by Antigonos Monophthalmos on the western coast of the Troad between 314 and 306 BCE, through the *synoicism* of four cities: Neandria, Kolonai, Skepsis, and Kebren. This new foundation had advantages that that no other *polis* in the region had: the *polis* was protected by imposing fortifications that made it the second greatest urban enclosure in Asia Minor after Ephesos, and it boasted a population of possibly 35,000 inhabitants by the 2nd century BCE. It possessed a large territory with good agricultural prospects for the cultivation of cereals, vines and olive trees, as well as some tradition in pastoralism. Moreover, it had access to the salt pans of Tragasai (after 188 BCE) and possibly to the granite quarries of the Çigri Dag. Finally, Alexandria Troas had a large port that was created presumably at the very beginnings of the city, though only Augustan remains could be found during the excavations, indicating a full reconstruction of the port.²

The factor that led to the commercial centrality of this *polis* is the port's geographical position in relation to the special climatological conditions of the region of the Dardanelles. These are created by the intense northwest/northeast winds and the parallel currents that made the navigation of the Hellespont impossible for the ships of the period during the seafaring season. Thus, like the *demos* of Tenedos according to Aristotle, a great part of the *demos* of Alexandria Troas would be employed in the *πορθμικόν*, the business of ferrying merchants beyond the Dardanelles when the weather allowed

it. So the *polis* would eventually become the main stop for all vessels and merchants that wanted to pass into the Black Sea and would provide services such as storage, accommodation, repairs or even transport by land if the winds would not subside. In this capacity, Alexandria would also serve as a ferrying point from Asia Minor to Europe and back.³

The evidence that points to this outcome is manifold: first, the city absorbed sooner or later all its regional competitors in this business. This included Larisa and Hamaxitos, two coastal cities of the Troad towards the south (around 188 BCE), and even Tenedos itself during the Augustan period. Secondly, numismatics bare evidence of how the city in the earliest stage of its existence adopted the Persian standard for their silver coinage in order to facilitate exchange in its markets by merchants and actors from both the Propontis, Asia Minor, and the region around it. This particular weight standard was popular after 350 BCE.⁴ This coinage was combined with copious amounts of bronze coinage, which shows the flourishing activity in the city's market place. The city's bronze coinage mainly circulated in the Troad, but a few finds are known from excavations and hoards abroad, such as at Thasos, Maroneia, Smyrna and Pergamon. This evidence also hints at merchants and other travellers constantly passing through the city and keeping change so they can use it in another visit. Thirdly, the extensive silver coinage cut in the name of Antiochos Hierax by Alexandria Troas, indicate the city's use as one of the main logistic centres of the prince's realm. Lastly, the vast wealth and widespread connections of the elite citizens, which are evident in the epigraphic record, can be definitely seen as connected to the position of Alexandria as the dominant way station on the commerce route to and from the Propontis and the Black Sea.

Neandria and Kolonai were two very modest *poleis* and depended on the commercial networks of Mytilene and Tenedos during the archaic and classical period. However, their union gave birth to a wealthy commercial power that equalled and surpassed its competitors.

Notes

¹ Boehm 2018, 15–18.

² Feuser 2009.

³ Barnes 2006.

⁴ Meadows 2004.

References

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