

A Bird's-eye View: the Legal Side of Imperial Seaborne Commerce

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Nowadays, Roman sea trade has been studied considering different sources of evidence, such as pottery, and through diverse theoretical approaches, such as new institutional economics or network analysis. All these methods have their strengths and limitations, as for example, the systematic study of amphorae limits the understanding of commerce just for specific areas or products. In addition, even if different authors have used Roman legal texts as describing some features of commerce, they have not considered the legal framework surrounding the different procedures involved in trade. Overall, one of the problems of the archaeological methods when studying sea trade is to focus mainly on the materials and not on the subjects interacting with them.

My work inside the ERC project *Portus Limen* is based on the study of the epigraphy of merchandise (e.g. amphorae, barrels, etc.), which reflects the commercial cycle in which the artefact was involved since it was bought (e.g. kilns, workshops) and until it arrived to a destination (e.g. port, market). These inscriptions, which reflect data such as product, merchant or quantity, shape a record and provide essential information about the agreements of sale and transport by sea performed by the parties involved in trade. Consequently, with the help of these inscriptions and other sources as legal or iconographic, I reconstructed a model of the procedures of distribution to understand the itinerary followed by merchandise setting sail from one port to other. The activities described not only depict the activity of the ports of the Mediterranean, since, when considering other regions of the Roman world, a number of these distribution stages can be identified in the different sources, materials and port structures. There were, therefore, geographical variations in the implementation of these procedures, but overall these activities happened throughout the Roman world. This model has been created considering all the elements that can be present at any port (e.g. warehouses, docks), and their locations (e.g. mouth of a river, implying transshipping in some occasions). This means that not just the enormous structures of the main Mediterranean ports, such as *Portus*, fit inside this model. Ports had contrasting structures built according to their function, to the features of the land or the city to which these ports were associated. However, we can gather something common from all of them: the procedures taking place to sell, control, transport and store the cargoes, setting sail and arriving there. In that way, the use of the model of the cycle of procedures of ports enables us to understand their peculiar features with the help of a common framework.

This paper aims to describe a model of the procedures taking place from a port of departure to a port of destination, considering the model described before. That model allows appreciating landscape as a place where procedures performed in trade and their legal framework were controlled and protected by the law of the Empire and other local

legal systems being also applied (e.g. Hellenistic, Jewish). This research intends to study the commercial activities taking place in these sites, linked to both the infrastructures and materials associated. This method can be included under the umbrella of the field of “juridical archaeology”, as it proceeds beyond the legal text and begins to investigate explanations and causal connections between reconstructed facts, the material remains and their outcome in the excavated site. Juridical archaeology focuses on archaeological sites where legal activities took place (e.g. contracts, control by the authorities of the empire, trials, taxation) and it attempts to analyse and explain the causal links between the legal facts reconstructed through the material remains. The analysis of the procedures performed in these sites, and in the places where the goods are distributed, will help to understand not just the distribution but also the risks and charges assumed by the merchants and the shippers. Consequently, this approach considers trade from a bird’s-eye view, focusing on the people involved in the transactions performed along the shores and understanding those as interacting activities between individuals, imperial and provincial authorities.

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