LABOR AND IDENTITY IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE:

AN EXPERIMENT IN FINDING THE NON-ELITE EXPERIENCE

by

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To my grandparents James and Eleanora Beardsley,
who used their own rejections to love and care for the unwanted.

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ABSTRACT

From its creation some two thousand years ago, to its discovery and interpretation in the modern period, ancient Roman literary and material evidence has slanted popular and scholarly understandings of the classical world in favor of elite narratives. The study of non-elite individuals, experiences, and perspectives therefore constitutes a persistent struggle to overcome a host of biases inherent in the nature, survival, and modern interpretation of the evidence. Such work has recently borne considerable fruit, thanks to the groundwork established over the past three decades by innovative literary and materially-minded scholars. Yet the task of finding those outside elite circles remains a challenge, especially for those just starting out in classical studies. This paper comes alongside the recent wave of scholarship on non-elites, combining all manner of material evidence— epigraphs, papyri, ostraka, workshop spaces, funerary monuments, and religious dedications—from select ports in the Roman period, with the goal of examining how communal groups could form in such intensely dynamic commercial environments. The study focuses on several groups of different backgrounds and commercial roles, exploring the ways in which their members related to each other, those outside their group, and the Roman state looming over them all. The comparison of these ports and their communities reveals a heavily work-centered sense of identity that could bind people together, while also placing them in a potentially paradoxical relationship with the Roman Empire, which could both facilitate and threaten the activities of these labor communities.

INTRODUCTION

The seeds of this project, unbeknownst to me or anyone else, began with a lecture on Roman laundry. The talk centered on now-faded wall paintings at the back of a *fullonica*, an ancient establishment where (often enslaved) workers washed laundry by, among other things, stomping on garments in urine for hours on end. While I lacked the art historical background to fully grasp the weight of every piece of imagery discussed, there was at least one fact that I understood loud and clear: historians can still inch towards a true understanding of "common" or "non-elite" life in the ancient Roman world, coming much closer than I had ever imagined. We may not ever find the remains of these individuals' broken bodies, their meager belongings, or a record of their achievements, but this, on its own, does not—indeed, must not—condemn a person to invisibility. As I have worked over the past twenty months to reach the climax of my undergraduate studies, this paradigm shift has progressively steered me toward further examples of possible access points in ancient people's lives, no matter their background, and toward the innovative groundwork established by my forerunners in the field of classical studies. Though this study will likely not make a dent in the issue on its own, it is my hope that, through the process, I have developed the experience necessary to continue tackling this beast for the rest of my academic career. Alongside my future colleagues in the field, that just might be enough.

My research will be comparative, examining three seaport sites to illuminate the ways in which participation in an international, commercial milieu could shape the self-identification of ancient groups and individuals in the Greco-Roman world. Each of these case studies differs from the others in chronological period, culture,

geographical location, history, demographics, and primary industry. Yet shared between them is their promise to reveal the ways in which local, foreign, and semi-integrated working groups formed community under Roman authority. Using the extensive material from these dynamic environments can reveal the variety of ways in which members of differing groups related to each other, as well as to the Roman state, whose interests could simultaneously align and collide with those of working groups. The resulting analysis of sample port communities will demonstrate that work constituted the primary source of self-identification and social connection for the average person working and living (at times, only seasonally) at a Roman port. Even where specialties differed, work proved a common denominator between local craftsmen, commercial representatives, and merchants from India or Arabia, each of whom played an important part in the operations of maritime trade.

The study will first establish the background knowledge required to contextualize the finer details specific to each port examined in this paper. This will first entail a high-level synopsis of the first millennium of Roman political history and the importance of the Mediterranean world's inherently maritime nature. Following this will be an outline of the numerous potholes on the road to finding "non-elites," as well as how this paper will attempt to curtail the inherent limitations of its subject without sliding into the scholarly negligence of baseless speculation. With these foundation stones in place, we will then move to each site individually, starting with the dual ports of Ostia and Portus on the south-central Italian coast. Their shared role as the primary harborage for the city of Rome in the common era oriented the

economy of these ports around the intake and storage of food to supply the imperial capital, enabling a focused assessment of labor-based communal dynamics and the Roman state's influence upon them. The good preservation and publication of these sites also provide much of the detailed information about laborers' social existence that is lacking at the other sites, allowing for a thoughtful mapping of Ostia-Portus onto the remaining two ports. From imperial Italy, we will then go back in time to the Aegean island of Delos, whose peak of commercial success in the second and first centuries BCE provides a more complicated—yet in some ways richer—snapshot of life at an international port. A truly international port, Delos is filled with evidence for groups of every social status, ethnic background, and occupational role. The material from this Aegean port also presages Rome's political, economic, and cultural influence over the Greek East, which can be seen in its more complete form with the final case study, Berenike. This Red Sea port will bring us back to the very height of the empire and complement many aspects of international trade seen at Delos, while also adding to the mix some of the state influence seen at Ostia. Furthermore, the grander scale of Berenike's operations and its status as a provincial settlement introduce a number of variables that distinguish the port from its counterparts in Italy and the Aegean, bringing us closer to an average of what harbor community could look like. While not a comprehensive survey by any means, these ports will together cover a wide stretch of space and time (400 years between Rome's ascension and its peak), filling the gaps in each other's evidence to weave a more complete tapestry of life and work at Roman ports.

Chapter 1

SOME NECESSARY BACKGROUND

A Brief Guide to the Roman Empire

While the Romans regaled themselves with stories about their city's legendary founding by the twins Romulus and Remus on April 21st, 753 BCE, archaeological evidence points instead to a gradual coalescing of several different villages.[1] This joining of villages does appear to have occurred around the mid-eighth century BCE, so, while still not a reliable source in and of itself, there may be some historical memory in Roman legend. The story then goes that kings ruled Rome until 509 BCE, when the Romans expelled Tarquin the Proud for his family's abuses of power and established a republic. Over the course of the next 250 years, Rome slowly muscled its way from a small city-state to become the hegemon of Italy, before gaining dominance over the entire Western Mediterranean through two grueling wars with its rival in Northwest Africa, Carthage. After the turn of the second century BCE, Rome became increasingly mired in military conflicts with the successor kingdoms of Alexander the Great's eastern empire, which for the previous century had squabbled with each other over hegemony in the Greek East. After 130 years of fighting with the Greek leagues,

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[1] For further reading on the history of ancient Rome, see Mary Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome*, 2nd ed. (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015); Mary Taliaferro Boatwright *et al.*, *A Brief History of the Romans*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Greg Woolf, *Rome: An Empire's Story* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). The realm of ancient Roman scholarship is of course immense, and so these works represent only initial recommendations for those interested in a more comprehensive overview.

Macedonia, the Seleucids, Pontus, Armenia, and Egypt, plus some additional wars with Northwest African kingdoms and tribes in Iberia and modern-day France, the Roman Republic found itself in effective control of the entire Mediterranean Sea (*Mare Nostrum*, Latin for "Our Sea"). The wars in the east also provided Rome with a huge supply of enslaved Greeks and other peoples, who worked alongside freeborn individuals in manual, administrative, and educational roles. An enslaved Greek can sometimes be identified by their single Greek name, while a formerly enslaved (freed) person can also sometimes be identified by their Greek *cognomen* (third name) paired with a Roman *praenomen* (personal name) and *nomen* (family name). However, recent scholarship has called into question the reliability of these methods for identifying social status, and one must therefore always treat them with a grain of salt.

Rome's successes abroad came at the cost of profound instability at home, since the government was designed to run a city, not a sprawling empire. From 133 BCE (the first recorded instance of political violence in Rome) to the deaths of Marc Antony and Cleopatra VII in 30 BCE, a continuing disregard for the rule of law by ambitious politician-generals produced a progressively unstable political environment. In this chaos, Julius Caesar's grandnephew and adopted son, Octavianus (most commonly referred to by his later honorific "Augustus"), successfully established a hereditary dynasty by adopting the guise of restoring republican traditions and values while simultaneously gathering the levers of power to himself. With this monarchical power, Augustus and his successors (excluding some infamous rulers like Caligula) stabilized, strengthened, and continued to expand the Roman Empire until the so-

called Crisis of the Third Century, a fifty-year period of unprecedented challenges—plagues, invasions, breakdowns in the economy, and issues of imperial succession—that together nearly brought the empire to its knees. For the sake of concision and historical cohesion, the beginning of the Crisis in 235 marks the rough chronological limit of material consulted for this study.

As a final point, the world of the ancient Mediterranean, from the Bronze Age through late antiquity, was profoundly shaped by its seas, which functioned as massive water highways. Merchant vessels could sell their wares hundreds of miles from home, making handsome profits and spreading elements of the foreign cultures with which they came into contact. Armies could sail abroad to secure the interests of their city-state, expand the territory of the latest imperial regime, or (in the case of mercenaries) simply make a quick buck. Workers and private individuals with other reasons for travel could effectively hitchhike with whichever crew was willing to take them in the direction of their destination. The Roman Empire's consolidation of the Mediterranean Sea (and its presence in the Red Sea, in the case of Berenike) made these activities far easier. The Empire facilitated the development of robust harbor infrastructure, provided a stable economy, and assured travelers that pirates or fleets from rival lands would not threaten their safety. The resulting stability, combined with the scope of Roman rule, created a highly diverse empire that (ignoring the heated scholarly debates around Romanization, or the lack thereof) was by no means homogenous. The temporal and geographical focus of this study, far from being an arbitrary selection of any ancient period or people, is therefore motivated by the

particular historical phenomena at work during this period of the Roman Empire's existence.

The Scholarly Background

The case for studying non-elites in the ancient world seems, at first glance, a weak one. Henry Bernstein and Terence Byres, specifically addressing the state of scholarship on Medieval peasants, state:

> The rationale of doing subaltern studies… derives from… the desire to write history from the viewpoint of subalterns (peasants and workers) as autonomous agents who create their own forms of oppositional culture and identity, who are not victims and/or followers, and whose ideas and actions are not to be represented (appropriated) by elite agents and discourses that claim to speak on their behalf.[2]

This is a noble desire indeed, and one apparently worth emulating in ancient studies, until one considers the peculiarities of the period. The corpus of surviving literature overwhelmingly represents works of history, geography, poetry, philosophy, and other genres dominated by the writing elite. The authors of such works—whether intentionally or not—usually preserve only the lives and interests of the most influential and wealthy individuals of the Greek and Roman worlds, while also

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[2] Henry Bernstein and Terence J. Byres, "From Peasant Studies to Agrarian Change," *Journal of Agrarian Change* 1, no. 1 (2001): 33, https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0366.00002.

filtering others' experiences through the lens of their own elite perspective or excluding their presence altogether. As Sandra Joshel notes in her work on the identity of enslaved laborers in the city of Rome, "[t]he very articulateness of the dominant narrative and the unexamined reinscription of its terms… make it difficult to write about the slave's [non-elite's] reading of the master's [elite's] terms or to assess his or her own terms. The frame of the dominant narrative is so embedded as to seem natural, self-evident, or unworthy of reflection."[3] Therefore, even those few pieces of ancient literature that depict or comment upon non-elites—such as historical accounts of popular uprisings, comedies with plots around prostitution, or novels with prominent enslaved or freed characters—can still obscure or replace the kind of personal intentions and perspectives that historians of more modern periods may confidently acquire through the (still sometimes lacking) direct accounts of the parties involved. Joshel and Lauren Petersen, again looking at the absences of enslaved people, state that "without the testimony of the slaves themselves, we can glimpse them only through the veil of these slaveholding authors."[4] So, too, with the many other groups whose representation by elites far outweighs their self-representation. Without the testimony of women, the poor, or the illiterate, we can only catch glimpses through the veil of their male relations, the rich, and the literati. Ancient

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[3] Sandra R. Joshel, *Work, Identity, and Legal Status at Rome: A Study of the Occupational Inscriptions* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 14.

[4] Sandra R. Joshel and Lauren Hackworth Petersen, *The Material Life of Roman Slaves* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 5.

historians must therefore exercise an increased level of caution when interpreting the extant literature, which lacks explicit or cohesive counter-narratives from below.

The material evidence, while in a better state, likewise provides a compromised representation of life in the ancient world. The structures most likely to have weathered the abuses of two millennia are those made of durable materials, designed and worked by the most skilled architects and craftsmen, and constructed with the intention of standing in perpetuity, all of which favor the wealthy, connected, legacy-minded Roman. The books surveying Roman art history are therefore bursting with images of public facilities promoting the beneficence of their sponsors; luxurious residences meant to impress clients and dinner guests with their scale and elegance; monumental tombs erected by or on behalf of the richest, most politically involved individuals of a city; and state-funded monuments in Rome, which proclaim the city's and the emperors' dominance and majesty. Far less likely to survive are a gardener's hut,[5] most floors of an apartment building, or a burial that amounted to no more than a hole in the ground. I admit to this evidentiary bias in my own archaeological fieldwork, which, across widely different sites, has involved the excavation of bathhouses, a rural villa house, a civic basilica, and a *stoa*, all of which were certainly commissioned by elite individuals. While the use of these spaces was by no means exclusive to the commissioning elites, their identities are usually easier to trace than the myriad non-elite individuals meeting, working, or relaxing in these buildings.

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[5] See Apul. *Met.* 9.32

Modern scholarship, too, has historically cemented and amplified elite narratives. While philologists developed important methodologies by which to analyze and critique ancient literature, they also worked with few alternatives to the opinions of the dominant class, who served as the only mouthpiece for how ancient peoples viewed their world.[6] Classical archaeology began as little more than antiquarian treasure-hunting by the richest citizens of imperialist European regimes. These earliest archaeologists sought to augment their wealth with priceless artifacts of a long-forgotten past, or their fame with discoveries of ancient Troy or magnificent villas in Pompeii. Even with the development of more sophisticated excavation methods and goals in the early twentieth century, scholars for most of the 1900s continued to focus on the same rich and powerful groups in whom the antiquarians had most readily seen themselves, and whom the material evidence most explicitly attests. This has affected not only the prevailing interpretations of the material culture—interpretations that, with much work, can be undone—but even the quality of our evidence. Utilitarian objects like kitchen implements, which do not so explicitly announce their historical or monetary value as do paintings, mosaics, sculptures, jewelry, or silver objects, have often gone undocumented, heaped in a pile somewhere in a storage area.[7] Many humbler surviving structures have languished in neglect, either unexcavated or, even worse, exposed and unstudied. Therefore, until around the

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[6] Joshel and Petersen, *The Material Life of Roman Slaves*, 33.
[7] Joshel and Petersen, *The Material Life of Roman Slaves*, 33–34.

turn of the twenty-first century, the literary and material scholarship largely formed a feedback loop in which the elite bias of the ancient sources informed investigations of the material culture, which, in turn, created victims of archaeological intent and justified the authority of elite literature in reconstructions of ancient society.

How, then, can classical scholars today chip away at the gaps in our understanding of non-elite life, without falling prey to the Scylla of fantastical speculation or the Charybdis of agnosticism? Joshel and Petersen demonstrate the silences that infiltrate the subject of non-elites, using Michel-Rolph Trouillot's framework of "four crucial moments" in the production of history.[8] The literary and archaeological remains (*sources*), archaeological research and cataloguing (*archives*), scholars' interpretations of what survives (*narratives*), and the consensus regarding what happened when, where, and why (*history*) have all fallen victim to the inequalities of both the ancient and the modern world. Yet these silences have not totally swallowed up any one of these four steps. While most of the ancient structures to have received study are, indeed, of elite origin, even here we can catch glimpses of the non-elite people living, working, and moving around in these spaces. Ceramic vessels capture the actions of storing and serving food and drink. Kitchen implements allow us to envision the (probably enslaved) workers toiling away during a banquet. The workshops of an *agora* or *forum* evidence the possibilities for small-scale industry

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[8] Joshel and Petersen, *The Material Life of Roman Slaves*, 5–6; Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 26.

or business. Even the mere layout of a house can hint at the ways in which people moved through—and, by extension, the actions they performed in—their home.[9] The data that these provide can, in aggregate, support new interpretations of non-elite life, particularly if juxtaposed with (rather than made dependent upon) information from the literary record. Non-traditional writings, such as inscriptions,[10] graffiti, and papyri also represent robust bodies of evidence for non-elite lives, as these are less often of elite origin and provide information in both the textual and the spatial realms. The subject matter of these media naturally cover many aspects of daily life neglected by the literary evidence, ranging from contractual agreements and funerary commemoration to the trade of goods and the labeling of people's belongings.

Dedications—funerary and honorary—arguably provide the most potential for exploring non-elite experiences. These capture a decent snapshot of the population, as the financial barrier to entry was, relatively speaking, fairly low. They also typically provide some information about the subject's life, personal connections, or societal roles, and epigraphers can read them (literally and figuratively) both as texts and as objects in conversation with the physical spaces around them. Funerary dedications, specifically, bring much to the table with regard to social conditions. As Dorian Borbonus argues, funerary culture and funerary remains provide a mirror (if a cloudy

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[9] See Joshel and Petersen's discussion of subversive tactics in the household: *The Material Life of Roman Slaves*, 24-86.

[10] While elites are also overrepresented in the inscriptionary corpus, the situation is far less egregious. One can readily find inscriptions (particularly of a funerary nature) that represent non-elite groups and individuals, and these will be the kinds of inscription referenced in this paper.

one) with which "to study cultural beliefs, social conditions, and historical change."[11] The medium of dedications does, however, lend itself simultaneously to formulaic conventions and to norm-breaking individuality, requiring one to parse between the two in order to properly convert representation into reality.[12] Reading dedications also requires taking on, essentially, a new language to avoid re-imprinting elite narratives onto the inscriptions, which rarely provide explicit mention of either the dedicant or the dedicatee's thoughts or feelings.[13]

Over the past twenty-to-thirty years, the field of classical studies has seen the growth of a movement—in both literature- and material-focused scholarship—to pay greater attention to the lives and agency of marginal lives in the ancient Mediterranean: women, enslaved and freed persons, the poor, and other such under-researched groups. The result has been a steadily growing wave of scholarship that reconsiders how we investigate new evidence, re-examines the old evidence, and proposes new narratives and, by extension, new history. Much of the theory and methodology is still in its nascent stages, especially compared to other sub-fields of history, but the only way to improve this state of things is to keep asking questions, which has served as the north star for this paper. One useful approach in this vein is to engage in what Amy Richlin has termed (in her book of the same name) "arguments

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11 Dorian Borbonus, *Columbarium Tombs and Collective Identity in Augustan Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 2.

12 John Bodel, *Epigraphic Evidence: Ancient History from Inscriptions*, Approaching the Ancient World, (London; New York: Routledge, 2001), 30–31.

13 Joshel, *Work, Identity, and Legal Status at Rome*, 14.

with silence."[14] This terminology is useful, because it frames the profound issues with our evidence as an absence not of people's experiences, but of their own voices to express those experiences. The alternative perspectives witnessed by these silent voices can, with skillful "argumentation," be coaxed or coerced out of our recalcitrant sources, providing a more complete picture of the ancient world. But the evidence does not comply easily and so demands that historians of the non-elite use as many types of evidence as possible—to paraphrase an analogy from Richlin, shooting at an invisible monster from all angles in order to see it in three dimensions.[15] This objective, however, is easier in theory than in practice. The uneven distribution of evidence forces historians to look, for example, at Egyptian papyrology for answers about the broader Roman Empire, in *necropoleis* for information about individuals' practices and beliefs before death,[16] or in the imperial capital for answers about provincial life. This paper is not of the appropriate length to sort out these limitations, but it is hoped that the comparative approach used in this study will sufficiently counter any imbalances in the evidence that arise from inherent limitations.

With such uncertain evidence (archaeological and literary), it is crucial to avoid the temptation to compensate by putting on airs of certainty. Despite the recent wave of optimistic research, much, if not most, of the information around non-elites

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14 Amy Richlin, *Arguments with Silence: Writing the History of Roman Women* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).
15 Richlin, *Arguments with Silence*, 6, 11.
16 Richlin, *Arguments with Silence*, 5.

has still been lost to time, just outside our grasp, and pretending otherwise will not change this reality. In her compelling article, "Honoring Ambiguity/Problematizing Certitude," Joan Gero emphasizes just how much uncertainty and near-guesswork there is in the field and pleads with her colleagues in feminist archaeology to resist implementing "mechanisms of closure."[17] That is, to eagerly pursue the creation of new knowledge, but openly acknowledge when the evidence is insufficient for "one specific and irrefutable determination," embracing complexity in the evidence rather than simplifying research questions or interpretations.[18] Honoring ambiguity inevitably places us in blurry, shifting sands, which may seem counterintuitive in conjunction with Richlin's call to argue with the silence. Yet Gero and Richlin's frameworks constitute two sides of the same coin: the one striving for ambiguity, the other for new data, but both reaching for a closer approximation to reality over a constructed facsimile of reality.

Reclaiming Agency

The great variety of material from harbor communities in the Roman Empire makes these contexts particularly useful for glimpsing the activities and thoughts of non-elites. The economies of these ports were highly diversified, including not only shipping (the main driver of traffic), but also fishing, manufacturing, restaurants, and

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[17] Joan M. Gero, "Honoring Ambiguity/Problematizing Certitude," *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 14 (2007), https://doi.org/10.1007/s10816-007-9037-1.
[18] Gero, "Honoring Ambiguity/Problematizing Certitude," 314–17.

local services. This intensely commercialized environment facilitated regular contact among people of all different backgrounds: man and woman; rich and poor; traveler, permanent resident, and itinerant worker; enslaved, freed, and freeborn; blacksmith, dockworker, domestic servant, prostitute, tavernkeeper, and market vendor. While similar milieus could be found at other sites further inland, the material recovered from Roman ports is typically more extensive, at least relative to their populations. Their many unique qualities do, however, make studying harbor communities (and these case studies in particular) a double-edged sword, as any conclusions must be tempered by the reality that they are, in many ways, anomalous and do not represent the typical Roman city. Furthermore, while more robust than at most other ancient locations, the material evidence can still be sparse, challenging to interpret, or skewed in an unrepresentative manner. We may, for example, confidently assume the presence of certain laborers at a port (sailors will always want to stop by a tavern or brothel after a long voyage), but their preservation in the material record is hardly of even distribution, so our research is tainted with evidentiary biases from the very beginning. Even for those groups with ample attestation in the material, it is often challenging, as Kim Bowes puts it, "to get from the product to the people," [19] to translate a material object into the person or persons that once created, bought, or used that object. Yet, despite these complications, the potential information that Roman ports provide is still

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[19] Kimberly Bowes, *Surviving Rome: The Economic Lives of the Ninety Percent* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025), 7.

substantial and, with sufficient care, can further illuminate our understanding of life in the Mediterranean world.

In many ways, this illumination amounts to resupplying the agency (or, to keep with Richlin's framework, the voice) of ancient non-elites from beyond the grave. The most common medium for such agency is ancient associations, which not only provided an avenue of agency for people in the past, but also provide evidence for this agency to scholars in the present. Associations took on a host of different names, including *collegium*, *factio*, and *coetus* in Latin and *thiasos*, *koinos*, *orgeon*, and *eranos* in Greek,[20] but for the sake of simplicity, this paper will use the blanket term "associations." They could serve any number of social roles, particularly religious (devotion to a particular deity), funerary (insurance for burial costs), and professional (cooperation between members of the same trade), though, as we will see in Delos, the lines between these functions could be blurred. Common across all associations, however, were their social gatherings and resulting sense of belonging within a broader social network. While important within their communities, these networks remained locally autonomous[21] and therefore never achieved the scale of influence exercised by modern, national labor unions (seen, for example, in the 2023 Hollywood strikes by the WGA and SAG-AFTRA). As John Kloppenborg and Steven Wilson

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[20] John S. Kloppenborg and Steven G. Wilson, *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), 17–18.
[21] Kloppenborg and Wilson, *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, 3.

have argued,[22] the Hellenistic period—when these associations began to pepper the Mediterranean—saw an unprecedented movement of people through trade, enslavement, and colonization. This shifted civic life away from the previously central Greek city (*polis*) and Roman homeland (*patria*), necessitating some sort of replacement to fill the gap. Thus, the purpose of associations was limited to the same locality as would be a *polis* or a *patria.* Travelers might participate in a sister association's activities or even permanently join them should they settle down, but this was the extent of associations' external reach. Alternatively, as Joshel argues, its attendant offices and hierarchies made association life attractive as a means by which people of meager resources could achieve standing and distinction outside the exclusive club of political life.[23] While most people could not afford to compete for office in the *cursus honorum* (the progression of magistracies within the Roman state), they could often substitute public involvement in the state with public involvement of a different, occupationally-defined sort.

Whatever the underlying motivations for their existence, the Roman state kept a watchful eye on associations (any social gatherings, really), wary of their supposedly subversive tendencies. We see evidence of this beginning in the twilight of the republic, with the growing involvement of *collegia* in the politics of the Roman capital causing such alarm that the Senate in 64 BCE passed a decree dissolving all *collegia*

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[22] Kloppenborg and Wilson, *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, 17–18.
[23] Joshel, *Work, Identity, and Legal Status at Rome*, 116–17.

"which appeared to conflict with public interest."[24] The demagogue Clodius Pulcher, who had been elected as one of the Tribunes of the Plebs, lifted this restriction in 58 BCE. Without the restriction of associations, Pulcher could use members of some of these groups in Rome as street thugs to intimidate his political opponents and stage an insurrection.[25] After this plot failed, the Senate broadened the formerly nebulous definition to include all *collegia* except for those with express permission from the state.[26] Its ability to enforce these restrictions must have left much to be desired, given that Julius Caesar banned them again during his dictatorship, as did Augustus after the conclusion of the civil wars. Both men did, however, carve out exceptions for "ancient" societies with origins dating back to the kings of Rome, which tied the legitimacy of collective organization not just to the state, but to themselves as monarchs.[27] Augustus further required the *collegia* to acquire his personal approval (nominally through the Senate) and to render some public service, ensuring that "the voluntary/private societies were conservative in character and publicly loyal to Augustus' administration."[28]

Imperial restrictions on associations appear to have applied not just to Rome or Italy, but to the provinces as well. Tiberius' crackdowns on associations in the

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[24] Kloppenborg and Wilson, *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, 75–76.
[25] Kloppenborg and Wilson, *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, 76.
[26] Kloppenborg and Wilson, *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, 76.
[27] Sarah Bond, *Strike: Labor, Unions, and Resistance in the Roman Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2025), 15–16; Kloppenborg and Wilson, *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, 78.
[28] Kloppenborg and Wilson, *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, 78.

homeland are mirrored in Egypt by the restrictions of the governor Flaccus, who, according to Philo (*Flacc*. 4), saw the dangers of clubs' feasting and drunkenness potentially turning into political unrest.[29] If a report by an association of Oxyrhynchan hieroglyph writers is any indication, even those associations permitted to meet were expected to send detailed reports of their membership to local officials.[30] In the west, Flavian-era (69-96 CE) municipal charters for the Spanish municipalities of Urso and Irni banned assemblies, with the latter town stipulating a fine of 10,000 *sesterces*: around 1,200 days' pay for a member of the Praetorian Guard at the time.[31] The well-known correspondence between Trajan and Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia and Pontus, included a request[32] on behalf of the Nicomedians to organize a fire brigade, in light of a recent preventable disaster. Despite Pliny's assurances that the organization would be no more than 150 strong, include only real firemen, and have no authority outside its charter, Trajan summarily rejected the proposal on the grounds that, no matter the name or supposed reason for existing, associations "will soon degenerate into secret societies," particularly in a province as historically troublesome as Pliny's.[33] Based on these examples, we may assume that state policy across the empire and across dynasties continued to entail tight control over any gatherings that

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[29] Kloppenborg and Wilson, *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, 80.
[30] Kloppenborg and Wilson, *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, 83–84.
[31] Bond, *Strike*, 84–85, 116.
[32] Plin. *Ep.* 10.33
[33] Plin. *Ep.* 10.34, as translated by John B. Firth, *The Letters of the Younger Pliny* (London; Felling-on-Tyne; New York: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., 1910).

might turn seditious or in any way subvert imperial authority. If we are to take Trajan's word as doctrine, this meant all gatherings, but how effectively the emperors enforced their restrictions is more debatable. Jinyu Liu's analysis of collegial inscriptions from 136 to 251 CE[34] found only twenty-four that referenced explicit senatorial or imperial permission to assemble granted to twenty-three different *collegia*, a tiny fraction of all associations in the empire. At least some funerary associations (*collegia tenuiorum*) flaunted the restrictions of a senatorial decree restricting their meetings to once a month for the purpose of collecting funds, making it likely that other associations also gathered under false pretenses to circumvent regulation or surveillance.[35]

In reclaiming (or rather rediscovering) non-elites' agency, this thesis will look not only to explicit examples like the formal associations detailed above, but also to the small, nearly untraceable acts of defiance that said, "The status quo will not define me." Opportunities for such resistance came most naturally to enslaved people, whose lives were shaped by oppressive legal restrictions on their movements, sexual relationships, financial means, and even their personhood. Under such stringent regulations, even something as simple as idling in a room or standing outside represented a meaningful breaking of the rules. Despite an owner's attempts at careful

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[34] Jinyu Liu, "Local Governments and Collegia: A New Appraisal of the Evidence," in *A Tall Order: Writing the Social History of the Ancient World: Essays in Honor of William V. Harris* (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2005), 294.

[35] Kloppenborg and Wilson, *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, 20–22.

coordination of his servile staff, the enslaved members of a household (the *familia*) could weaponize their intimate knowledge of the building to—in a legal sense—steal themselves away, out of the sight of their owner, who might interpret their absence as simple laziness or stupidity.[36] If we are to accept Roman comedy as in some way reflecting a social reality, even enslaved prostitutes—whose experience of legal and bodily subjection was arguably the most extreme—could exercise agency through whatever skills they acquired from their owners. The primary evidence for this comes from Plautus's *Pseudolus*, in which the prostitute Phoenicium wields her stylistic training to implore one of her elite customers into buying her instead of a Macedonian soldier, who had already struck a deal with her owner.[37] One may imagine courtesans outside the fictitious realm of comedy who, instilled with some kind of special training by their owners (most likely with the mere intent of increasing his their value), similarly took back some control over their lives despite their lack of autonomy. This paper will invite readers to exercise their imagination in a similar fashion when confronting the incomplete archaeological evidence for such resistance among freed laborers at Delos or local inhabitants at Berenike.

Even were we to find no such evidence for small acts of defiance, we could still catch glimpses of individuals' views of society and their places within it by

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[36] Joshel and Petersen, *The Material Life of Roman Slaves*, 59–66.

[37] Judith P. Hallett, "Ballio's Brothel, Phoenicium's Letter, and the Literary Education of Greco-Roman Prostitutes: The Evidence of Plautus's Pseudolus," in *Greek Prostitutes in the Ancient Mediterranean, 800 BCE–200 CE*, ed. Allison Glazebrook and Madeleine M. Henry (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 172–93.

looking at how non-elites represented themselves, most often through funerary art or epitaphs. An excellent example of this work is Joshel's analysis of epitaphs from Rome that reference the occupation of enslaved or freed persons, an analysis that illuminates not only the practical role of work in the lives of the deceased, but also its impact on their values and self-definition. References to the occupations of enslaved workers hint at an awareness of the "dual dependency" between enslaver and enslaved (the former having the power of life and death, the latter enabling their owners' participation in elite society),[38] while for freed persons their occupations demonstrated their value to society not through their high birth or status, but through their work.[39] Petersen has made similar arguments using the so-called Tomb of the Baker Eurysaces (*ca.* 30–20 BCE) in Rome, which can likewise be read both as a proclamation of the eponymous baker's value through his work and as a representation of another form of duel dependency between employer (benefactor of his employees) and employees (integral actors necessary for the functioning of their employer's business).[40] This and other tombs—particularly *columbaria*, massive, subterranean complexes filled with niches for cremation burials—were also used to place oneself within a larger network of relations, such as between other bakers or between members of the same association.[41] Such analysis of the material from enslaved, freed, and freeborn

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[38] Joshel, *Work, Identity, and Legal Status at Rome*, 158–61.
[39] Joshel, *Work, Identity, and Legal Status at Rome*, 59–61.
[40] Lauren Hackworth Petersen, *The Freedman in Roman Art and Art History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 114–17.
[41] Borbonus, *Columbarium Tombs and Collective Identity in Augustan Rome*, 140–42.

members of port communities will bring forth similar fruit, filling out the picture of non-elite identity.

Chapter 2

OSTIA-PORTUS: WORKING UNDER IMPERIAL OVERSIGHT

From the first century of the common era, the million or so inhabitants of the imperial capital were fed by imports of grain from across the empire, all of which made their way through the dual ports of Ostia and Portus. With such a crucial role (providing the bread in "bread and circuses"), the Roman emperors had a vital interest in stabilizing the flow of grain, oil, and other foodstuffs. They therefore invested heavily in the development of these two ports, sponsoring infrastructure projects that augmented the efficiency and adaptability of their shared workforce. The effects of this investment can be seen in the architecture and visual arts of the area, as with the craftsman Verrius (to be discussed at the end of this section), whose tomb illustrates that his work simultaneously benefitted from and supported the joint Ostia-Portus economy. Independent workers like Verrius, as well as the countless Ostian associations that supported the movement of food from abroad, would therefore have felt an indebtedness to the Roman state, a sentiment with occasional counterbalances in the form of paranoid emperors' crackdowns on free assembly.

Ostia was originally located on the Tyrrhenian coast, by the mouth of the Tiber River, but now lies some ways inland, due to sedimentation from the Tiber's outflow (see fig. 1). The Romans believed that Ancius Marcius, the fourth king of Rome, founded the settlement, but whether its history actually stretches as far back as the

seventh century is impossible to say based on the archaeology.[42] The earliest remains are from a military camp founded around 300 BCE, which would have been used not for trade, but to defend the river and the sea near Rome's doorstep from pirates and foreign enemies. Starting with the Punic Wars in the third century BCE, Rome's need for and access to grain from overseas (mostly Sicily, Sardinia, Egypt, and Northwest Africa) exploded, turning the military outpost into a key entry point for the belly of the empire. However, until the first century CE, Ostia's harbor could not accommodate the large ships coming from abroad,[43] creating a bottleneck for Rome's supply of food, which had to be offloaded onto smaller vessels or shipped to Puteoli on the Bay of Naples, from which it was then transported more than 100 miles over land or by sea on smaller coastal barges.[44]. Claudius therefore began construction of a brand-new sea harbor, the *Portus Augusti* (also known simply as Portus) two miles north of Ostia. Nero completed the construction of Portus in 64 CE, and Trajan enlarged it fifty years later by adding a hexagonal inner harbor and digging a channel to connect the two harbors directly to the Tiber. While one might expect the construction of Portus to render Ostia obsolete, the two ports instead entered a symbiotic relationship that kept

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[42] The following derives from the brief synopses of Ostia's history in van der Meer and Hermansen — L. Bouke van der Meer, *Ostia Speaks: Inscriptions, Buildings, and Spaces in Rome's Main Port* (Leeuven; Walpole, MA: Peeters Publishers, 2012), 4–9; Gustav Hermansen, *Ostia: Aspects of Roman City Life* (Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Press, 1982), 1–7.

[43] Geoarchaeology indicates a depth of only 1.2 meters by the first century CE: Simon Keay *et al.*, *The Isola Sacra Survey: Ostia, Portus and the Port System of Imperial Rome* (Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2020), 156.

[44] Geoffrey Rickman, *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1980), 17–18.

Ostia thriving until the Crisis of the Third Century, and even then, the last Ostians only left in the ninth century due to Saracen raids. Portus received the bulk of shipments, mostly the *annona* (Rome's grain supply), but also oil from Spain and North Africa.[45] Ostia, however, remained an important location for the storage of goods, whether for local consumption or for trans-shipment, and most people still lived and worked in Ostia. As with all ancient Mediterranean ports, the activity at Ostia-Portus was cyclical in nature, peaking during the summer and falling to a maintenance level during the winter, when sailing became more dangerous. The following summary of the labor and commerce at these two ports will take the most inclusive approach, assuming the presence of all those temporary residents who were attracted to the ports during peak shipping periods, a group that included "migratory workers, peddlers, and caterers, free or unfree… engaged in the moving of grain and other goods, in the catering to travellers, and in the extra jobs deriving from these activities."[46]

The warehouses (*horrea*) at Ostia were substantial, serving a key role in the local economy. The Portus Project, directed by Simon Keay, conducted a geophysical survey of Isola Sacra—the island between Ostia and Portus, bounded by the sea, the Tiber, and the Trajanic canal—between 2008 and 2012 that revealed extensive *horrea*

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[45] See Monte Testaccio, a 118-foot hill in Rome comprised entirely of broken amphorae, most of which would have made their way through Ostia-Portus: Janet DeLaine, "Monte Testaccio," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. Simon Hornblower, Antony Spawforth, and Esther Eidinow (4th ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[46] Hermansen, *Ostia: Aspects of Roman City Life*, 8.

in addition to those already known from Ostia proper. [47] This additional warehousing roughly doubles prior estimates of Ostia's storage capacity—now estimated to constitute roughly 43% of the area's storage in the early second century and 37% in the late second century—bringing it within striking distance of the capacity at Portus. Keay *et al*. therefore estimate that the two ports could together house enough grain to feed a third of a million legionaries for a whole year.[48] This is not to say that the warehouses in Ostia and Isola Sacra were used exclusively for grain. Many so-called "courtyard *horrea*" included in their design an internal portico, which may have facilitated easy movement of goods, but, as Janet DeLaine convincingly argues, more likely functioned as commercial space to actually sell the goods stored there.[49] Therefore, despite the grand works at Portus being purpose-built by the emperors to supply Rome, Ostia managed to retain its commercial importance to the imperial capital, for which it was rewarded with a thriving local economy that could exploit the very same facilities used for the importation activities on which its livelihood depended.

In addition to the larger marketplaces like courtyard *horrea*, an eye-watering number of individual businesses, offering a wide variety of services, have been documented at Ostia. The common space for these businesses was the *taberna*, the

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[47] Keay *et al.*, *The Isola Sacra Survey*, 167–68.
[48] Keay *et al.*, *The Isola Sacra Survey*, 167–68.
[49] Janet DeLaine, "The Commercial Landscape of Ostia," in *Roman Working Lives and Urban Living*, ed. Ardle Mac Mahon and Jennifer Price (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2005), 39–43.

catch-all term (both in antiquity and in modern archaeology) for a commercial unit characterized by a wide entryway facing onto the street (see fig. 2). These entrances provided a clear view from the street of the wares on display or of the activities taking place inside these venues, making it easier for proprietors to convert passersby into customers. *Tabernae* could facilitate any sort of commercial activity, including, but not limited to, retail, small-scale manufacturing, laundry cleaning, baking, and selling food and drink.[50] At Ostia, over 800 *tabernae* have been identified in every conceivable context, including along the main streets of the city, near major public buildings, inside enclosed market spaces (both courtyard *horrea* and dedicated marketplaces), and along minor streets where locals would be familiar with the available services.[51] The ubiquity and variety of Ostian *tabernae* point to a community that, while still reliant upon the *annona*, managed to diversify into a bustling hub for all types of commerce, not just food imports.

In addition to their activities in Ostia itself, locals served an important role as a labor pool to support the work at Portus. We have comparatively little archaeological evidence at Portus for the very things that make Ostia such a vibrant site: *tabernae*, marketplaces,[52] and even substantial residences.[53] Ostia, however, clearly had

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[50] For an in-depth discussion of the potential uses of *tabernae*, see Claire Holleran, *Shopping in Ancient Rome: The Retail Trade in the Late Republic and the Principate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 117–57.

[51] DeLaine, "The Commercial Landscape of Ostia," 33–36.

[52] DeLaine, "The Commercial Landscape of Ostia," 30, 40.

[53] Simon Keay *et al.*, *Portus: An Archaeological Survey of the Port of Imperial Rome*, Archaeological Monographs of the British School at Rome, (London: The British School at Rome, 2005), 311–12.

extensive apartment blocks that were common at other major Roman urban sites like Pompeii and (presumably) Rome, as well as potential living space on the upper floors of Isola Sacra's courtyard *horrea*.[54] Assuming that the identification of living spaces in these multi-use structures is somewhat accurate, the residents could have worked either directly in the warehouses where they lived or, as Keay *et al*. posit, at Portus, less than an hour's walk away. In either case, Ostia's role in receiving grain and other imports was sizeable, not limited to mere auxiliary storage. By contrast, the absence of such robust evidence for commercial and residential life at Portus highlights the level of decentralized labor compared to what might have been. Had the emperors desired, they could have pushed for laborers to live and work exclusively in the main receiving hub, thereby turning Portus into a more efficient and well-oiled machine. Instead, they chose to reinforce the ports' symbiosis with two infrastructure projects that linked Ostia's labor force with imports from Portus. The Flavian emperors built a road known today as the Via Flavia,[55] while Trajan likely dug a canal used until the third-century decline[56] (fig. 3). The result of the emperors' policy was that overseers of the *annona*, despite their business being in Portus, were based in Ostia and used the Via Flavia or the Portus-Ostia canal to commute.[57] This, in combination with the continued development of Ostia in tandem with Portus—through investments both

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[54] Keay *et al.*, *The Isola Sacra Survey*, 168. While this represents only a passing remark by the authors, I see no reason to discount their theory.
[55] Keay *et al.*, *The Isola Sacra Survey*, 19–20.
[56] Keay *et al.*, *The Isola Sacra Survey*, 123–45.
[57] Keay *et al.*, *The Isola Sacra Survey*, 169. Drawing upon Cébeillac-Gervasoni *et al*.

private and imperial[58]—illustrates a mutual dependence between the two ports that lasted until at least the third century.

Due to this thriving dual economy, association life at Ostia was especially robust among workers involved in the two ports' importation operations, which provided ample opportunity for these individuals to convert their work life into social life. Gustav Hermansen collates the epigraphic attestations of approximately forty associations (involved in everything from grain shipping, commerce, and transport to miscellaneous trades, civil service, and cultic activities), which must be the minimum of a much greater number of groups that, thanks to the whims of history-making (and of limestone scavengers), are unknown to us.[59] Some of these associations are known from the Square of the Guilds (discussed below), while others have been identified by the remains of their dedicated seats throughout the city: buildings for caulkers, carpenters, loggers, shipwrights, shipowners, small boatmen, public servants, and grain measurers.[60] The so-called Hall of the Grain Measurers provides a particularly revealing illustration of the social importance of membership in an association. Situated directly adjacent to a temple of Ceres, the goddess of grain, this guild seat contains a well-preserved mosaic floor depicting five men and a boy playing different

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58 Janet DeLaine, "Building Activity in Ostia in the Second Century AD," *Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae*, no. 27 (2002): 41–76.
59 Hermansen, *Ostia: Aspects of Roman City Life*, 56–59.
60 Hermansen, *Ostia: Aspects of Roman City Life*, 61–75.

roles in their trade (fig. 4).[61] While the identifying features of the leftmost individual have been destroyed, we can deduce the activities of the other five people. One of them carries a sack of grain, the boy tracks the sacks with a counting device, and a second sack-bearer stands with his empty sack beside a *modius* (the vessel used for grain-measuring) as the remaining two men measure out the grain. John Clarke argues—based on his posture, his wielding of the *rutellum* (a stick used to level out grain in the *modius*), and his prominent position near the center of the mosaic—that the leftmost measurer may in fact have been the head of the association.[62] This would mean that the mosaic provided viewers with the full range of hierarchy within the association: from boy accountant and sack-carrying grunt to measurer and chief measurer. Accompanying the image is a partially damaged inscription, which the Italian archaeologist Giovanni Becatti reconstructed as *V[ilici] Sex H(orreorum) Agi(lianorum) Hi[c]*, "Six [workers] of the Agilianus Warehouses here."[63] As Clarke notes, the mosaic image and inscription together visualize the sort of social advancement and esteem that one could expect to find through association life, while also expressing the group's solidarity in their collective work.[64]

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61 The following description of the mosaic derives from John R. Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans: Visual Representation and Non-Elite Viewers in Italy, 100 B.C.-A.D. 315* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 125–29.

62 Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 128.

63 Giovanni Becatti, *Mosaici e pavimenti marmorei*, vol. 4, *Scavi di Ostia*, (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, Libreria dello Stato, 1961), 35.

64 Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 128.

While harder to track, similar dynamics of companionship surely played out among the many other, less affluent Ostian associations that gathered in common spaces, particularly bars. At least thirty-eight bars have been identified at Ostia, but, as with the associations, this number can only be a fraction of the total present during the city's peak.[65] The demand for bars would certainly have been high, not only from local customers or itinerant workers, but also from the associations themselves. That these commonly met in such venues is indicated by the anti-association legislation of Claudius, who "in order to attack the evil at its root… closed the taverns where the members of the guilds used to meet and drink."[66] That these smaller-scale associations endured such crackdowns may indicate that they posed a greater threat to Rome's authority, whether through their individual activities or as a larger collective of unregulated groups. One can imagine how much easier it must have been for the emperors to keep tabs on sanctioned associations, which were often centralized in conspicuous locations like the Square of the Guilds or the individual guild seats, as opposed to tiny groups that gathered alongside other civilians in the dozens of bars dotting the cityscape.

Just as Ostia and Portus relied upon each other to fuel their joint economy, so too did the associations involved in the importation of food depend upon each other to keep the industry going. This interdependence did not remove the distinctions between

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65 Hermansen, *Ostia: Aspects of Roman City Life*, 186–87.
66 Hermansen, *Ostia: Aspects of Roman City Life*, 198–200.

different associational activities and identity, but it likely did foster a larger collective identity oriented not around craft, but around mutual involvement in the maritime trade that formed the beating heart of Ostia-Portus. The Square of the Guilds (fig. 5) provides a rich snapshot of these interrelations by situating within one relatively condensed space the occupations most important to the trade taking place at Ostia-Portus. The square is flanked on one side by Ostia's theater and on each other side by a row of office spaces (sixty-one across the entire square), each with a black-and-white mosaic depicting the business based there. Represented among the offices that can safely be identified (many of the mosaics are either in terrible shape or completely destroyed) are workers involved in the trade of grain and other foodstuffs, including grain measurers and a host of shipmasters from the bread basket provinces.[67] A handful of offices were also operated by ropemakers, tanners, and timber shippers, all of whom would have played a role in rehabilitating damaged ships. By situating themselves within this mutual, service-based marketplace, the associations on the square linked themselves and their endeavors together in a more visible, tangible way than would have been possible from their own guild seats scattered around the city. A shipmaster from *Africa Proconsulari*s could have made his way a few meters down to the office of the timber shippers and contracted some repairs to his vessel, then returned to his own office and receive orders for his latest grain shipment. Or, as John

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[67] Russell Meiggs, *Roman Ostia*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 283–87; Meer, *Ostia Speaks*, 31–37.

Clarke hypothesizes, a grain merchant from Rome could have secured a contract to buy grain from one of the numerous shipping companies set up along the square, then gone straight to a grain measurers' association to ensure everything remained above board.[68] The Square of the Guilds therefore provided a space in which, despite their different trades or social backgrounds, everyone ultimately shared in the responsibility and rewards of importing foodstuffs for the hungry imperial capital.

Even other craftsmen, not so directly tied to the grain trade or a formal association, could still find their own sense of belonging within the larger community, as indicated by the tomb of the tool sharpener Verrius. Three funerary reliefs (figs. 6–8) show Verrius working at both permanent and portable workstations,[69] the latter of which he could have used to take his business beyond Ostia, whether by boat along the Portus-Ostia canal or by foot on the Via Flavia. In either situation, Verrius would have regularly been reminded of the emperors' sponsorship of Portus, without which Ostia's economic prosperity would have been more questionable. He would also have appreciated the infrastructure connecting the two ports, which enabled his personal success and his commissioning of such an expensive, permanent monument. The scenes of Verrius rehabilitating the tools of various other workers at the port also

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[68] Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, 125.

[69] Allan B. Daoust, "At the Cutting Edge of Identity: Re-Examining the Craft Imagery of Tomb 29 from the Isola Sacra Necropolis, Ostia," *Journal of the Classical Association of Canada* 19, no. 2 (2022): 196–207. Verrius has historically been identified as a blacksmith, based on Guido Calza's original analysis of Tomb 29 in 1931 and 1940, but Daoust makes a convincing argument in favor of his identification as a tool sharpener.

represent him as an integral part of these workers' crafts and, in some way, a member of their respective labor communities. Verrius' tomb therefore announces his value to the economy of the empire's most important ports and his relationship with a number of different labor groups, potentially including the formal associations for which we have explicit evidence. At the same time, however, his connections with a wide range of laborers may have made him especially aware of the regulations and surveillance employed by the Roman emperors to ensure that these micro-communities did not become threats to the status quo. The place of Verrius, and other Ostian workers like him, in Roman society was therefore a dissonant one, caught between gratitude to a monument-raising state and unease over its distrust of the primary avenue for identity-making, namely, associations.

Chapter 3

DELOS: ARRIVAL OF THE EMPIRE

In contrast to the later development of Ostia-Portus, Delos experienced a much more cosmopolitan "boomtown" phase, one not so directly under the watchful eye of the Roman state. This tiny Aegean island had a history long-predating Rome's expansion eastward in the second and first centuries BCE, holding cultural significance as the birthplace of Artemis and Apollo, the home of one of Apollo's sanctuaries, and the venue for athletic games in his honor from at least Homeric times.[70] It also gained political prominence in the fifth century BCE as the treasury of the eponymous Delian League,[71] though it remained subordinated to Athenian influence and eventually had its treasury removed to Athens by Pericles.[72] Delos then, during the Hellenistic period, engaged in a long back-and-forth struggle with Athens over its autonomy, until the creep of Rome's influence into the Greek East transformed the island into the center of east-west Mediterranean trade. Placing it under the putative authority of Athens, Rome designated Delos a duty-free port in 166 BCE as punishment against the nearby island of Rhodes for its ambiguous loyalty during the Third Macedonian War.[73] Delian trade received an additional boost from

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70 Str. 10.5.2; Hom. *Od.* 6.162-165; Thuc. 3.104

71 Thuc. 1.96

72 Plut. *Per.* 12.1-2

73 Polyb. 30.20.1-6, 30.31.9-10; Adam Lindhagen, "The Freedmen Milieus at Delos and Narona: New Perspectives on the Lamboglia 2 Wine Trade," in *Perspectives on Ancient Greece*, ed. Ann-Louise Challin (Stockholm: Swedish Institute at Athens, 2013), 235.

the destruction in 146 BCE of Corinth, one of the few remaining competitors for economic traffic, before the island fell victim to the conflicts between Rome and the Mithridatic kingdom of Pontus in the early first century BCE.

The duty-free status of Delos resulted in roughly eighty years of unparalleled economic prosperity before the island's untimely decline at the hands of Mithridatic forces, which assaulted the island in 88 and 69 BCE. Though demographic evidence is limited, population estimates range as high as 6,000 to 15,000 during the Athenian cleruchy, in contrast to the 1,500-2,000 residents during Delian independence.[74] This is to say nothing of the merchants from across the Mediterranean world who descended upon Delos during the summer sailing season to trade in luxury goods, western wine, and (most infamously) western-bound victims of enslavement from the Greek east.[75] To match this staggering rise in activity, the settlement (now a city in its own right) greatly expanded its facilities (see figs. 9–10).[76] During the Athenian cleruchy, the Delians built three new marketplaces (the Agorae of the *Competaliastai*, of Theophrastos, and of the Delians) around the Apollo sanctuary to support the sheer number of incoming merchants. Immediately surrounding these *agorae*, there arose shops, offices, *stoae*, and at least one meeting hall (the Hypostyle Hall). Residential

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74 Mantha Zarmakoupi, "Shaping the City of Late Hellenistic Delos," *The Journal of Ancient Architecture* 1 (2022): 66, https://doi.org/10.19272/202214301003.

75 Zarmakoupi, "Shaping the City of Late Hellenistic Delos," 67.

76 Zarmakoupi, "Shaping the City of Late Hellenistic Delos," 67–69; Nicholas K. Rauh, *The Sacred Bonds of Commerce: Religion, Economy, and Trade Society at Hellenistic Roman Delos*, 166-87 B.C. (Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 1993), 80–81.

neighborhoods developed both in the city center near the Apollo sanctuary and, with space running out there, in more remote (but still walkable) areas of the island. Warehouses arose in the Theater District to the south of the sanctuary, and possibly also in the Skardana District to the north and the *Stadion* District to the northeast. Despite this impressive building boom, however, the facilities discovered so far do not nearly correspond to the level of activity that our ancient sources indicate. The warehouses to the south are not particularly substantial,[77] and while the ancient geographer and historian Strabo (writing around the turn of the first centuries BCE/CE) reports that as many as 10,000 enslaved people could be sold in a single day,[78] there is still no agreed upon identification for "the slave market" into which these thousands of trafficked victims could be securely funneled and sold. It is therefore likely that the scene at the Delian markets was much more modest than the conventional picture of thousands being escorted through one of the *agorae* and onto auction blocks. Hervé Duchêne and Mantha Zarmakoupi explain this incongruence by analogy to entrepôts like London or premodern Hong Kong, which served as nexuses for the negotiation process, but not as final product destinations.[79] The economic environment of Delos was likely quite similar, consisting of the presentation of enslaved individuals and material goods for quality inspection; the resupplying of

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[77] Zarmakoupi, "Shaping the City of Late Hellenistic Delos," 69.

[78] Strabo 14.5.2

[79] Zarmakoupi, "Shaping the City of Late Hellenistic Delos," 69–71. Hervé Duchêne, "Délos, Réalités Portuaires et Emporion," in *L'Emporion*, ed. Alain Bresson and Pierre Rouillard (Paris: Diffusion de Boccard, 1993), 125. (Via Zarmakoupi).

vessels; and whatever consumption of imports was needed to maintain the standard of living for Delian inhabitants.

While the primary attractions of Delos were the wares and enslaved people brought by other merchants, there is evidence that Delians themselves may also have played a role in international trade, namely through local agriculture and manufacturing. Many presses for wine and olive oil have been discovered across the island, complementing the extant inscriptions that catalogue agricultural produce like grapes, olives, figs, and apples.[80] While there is little evidence to suggest that alimentary products made their way beyond the island, many of the olives did go toward the production of perfume, if we are to believe Pliny the Elder's claim that "the most appreciated perfume came from Delos."[81] This requires no stretch of the imagination. Among the eastern merchants frequenting the island were Arabs (Sabaeans, Gerrheans, Hadramawtians, Minaeans) and Samaritans, both of whom brought aromatics through their respective networks further east.[82] Mixing home-grown oil with these aromatics, Delians could not only produce luxury perfumes—used in the Greek world for everything from ritual and funerary rites to exercise at

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[80] Jean-Pierre Brun, "The Production of Perfumes in Antiquity: The Cases of Delos and Paestum," *American Journal of Archaeology* 104, no. 2 (2000): 282–85, https://www.jstor.org/stable/507452. For Brun's discussion of the numerous complications surrounding the interpretation of these inventory inscriptions, see 284–285.

[81] Plin. HN 13.4, trans. Brun, "The Production of Perfumes in Antiquity," 286.

[82] Brun, "The Production of Perfumes in Antiquity," 288–89; David F. Graf, "Arabs in the Aegean in the Early Hellenistic Period," *Studies in the History and Archaeology Jordan* 11 (2014): 202–03; Søren Lund Sørensen and Klaus Geus, "Minaeans in the Mediterranean. Reevaluating Two Old South Arabian Inscriptions from Delos," *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 34 (2023): 128–31, https://doi.org/10.1111/aae.12229.

palaestrae, *gymnasia*, and baths[83]—but have them quickly distributed across the Mediterranean before they had a chance to spoil,[84] all thanks to the bustling markets just down the road.

The place for creating these perfumes, as well as other manufactured products, appears to have been small-scale workshops derived from the restructuring of larger houses. The typical upscale residence on Delos was originally designed with a peristyle courtyard near its entrance, adjacent to which was a large, luxurious room (the *oecus maior*) that then connected to smaller, more closed-off rooms (the *oeci minores*).[85] To enable commercial enterprises, owners could divide these rooms—*maiores* and *minores*—into modest, utilitarian units or (space permitting) expand the area of their property and use this new real estate for workshops, largely maintaining the original layout of their house (for examples of such restructuring, see figs. 11–14).[86] Even in the case of a total restructuring of the household, these workspaces were usually sequestered from private living spaces, mirroring similar developments in Italy from the same period.[87] Some houses allowed for a third option, in which original rooms saw no reorganization before being outfitted for their new purpose. For

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[83] Brun, "The Production of Perfumes in Antiquity," 286.
[84] Brun, "The Production of Perfumes in Antiquity," 289–90.
[85] Zarmakoupi, "Shaping the City of Late Hellenistic Delos," 71.
[86] Zarmakoupi, "Shaping the City of Late Hellenistic Delos," 71–74.
[87] Zarmakoupi, "Shaping the City of Late Hellenistic Delos," 79. Drawing upon Trümper and Karvonis.

example, the spaces used for olive oil[88] and perfume[89] production in House III-O (fig. 15) and House I-B (fig. 16), respectively, required no revisions in order to accommodate equipment like presses, furnaces, settling basins, and pits for *pithos* jars. While Zarmakoupi[90] downplays the significance of manufacturing to the overall picture of the island's trade, the desirability of Delian perfumes discussed above calls this into question and begs us to imagine other small-scale, domestically-produced wares that could have made their way beyond the local community. As one example, three temple inscriptions attest not only the trade of ivory on Delos, but its declining value and, presumably, its growing ubiquity on the island.[91] The inscriptions provide snapshots of the price paid for ivory (likely imported through Ptolemaic Egypt) across a twenty-nine-year period, showing a precipitous drop from eight drachmae per *mina* (a unit of weight) in 279 BCE to only three and a half in 250 BCE. Assuming the preponderance of ivory on the island continued into the second and first centuries BCE, might Delians have also worked this material into finished products for international export? What about other such luxury goods? While the evidence may be less certain in these cases, we still must not discard the potential for a robust local community of manufacturers on Delos, who could take advantage of their location to create high-value products out of relatively cheap raw materials.

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88 Zarmakoupi, "Shaping the City of Late Hellenistic Delos," 73.

89 Brun, "The Production of Perfumes in Antiquity," 285–88.

90 Zarmakoupi, "Shaping the City of Late Hellenistic Delos," 79.

91 Matthew Adam Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century CE* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2018), 31.

Beyond native Delians, the permanent population of the island consisted of numerous enslaved and freed persons who managed day-to-day affairs on behalf of their often absent Roman-Italian owners or patrons. While many merchants came from Syria, Phoenicia, Palestine, Egypt, and even as far away as modern-day Yemen, most were either Roman citizens or at least of Italian origin.[92] Wine seems to have been the primary export of Roman-Italians, based on the preponderance at Delos of Lamboglia 2 amphorae, a type of wine amphora produced along the Adriatic coast in either Italy or Dalmatia.[93] These vessels made their way as far east as Alexandria and Jerusalem, most often in exchange for enslaved Greeks, whom wine merchants would then bring with them on their return journeys and sell into western vineyards.[94] We gain a sense for the importance of the wine trade to the Roman-Italian businessmen of the island from a number of dedications to Dionysus (paired with other gods like Hermes and Apollo)[95] and two mosaics of Dionysus[96] that can be safely connected to the freed agents of these trading *familiae*. Based on epigraphic material from the island, we

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92 T. Davina McClain and Nicholas K. Rauh, "The Brothels at Delos: The Evidence for Prostitution in the Maritime World," in *Greek Prostitutes in the Ancient Mediterranean, 800 BCE–200 CE*, ed. Allison Glazebrook and Madeleine M. Henry (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 148–49; Zarmakoupi, "Shaping the City of Late Hellenistic Delos," 67. Due to the difficulties in distinguishing between citizen and non-citizen in the archaeological record, I will be using Zarmakoupi's catch-all term of "Roman-Italians" to avoid confusion.

93 For the evidence in favor of Dalmatia, see Lindhagen, "The Freedmen Milieus at Delos and Narona," 231–32.

94 Lindhagen, "The Freedmen Milieus at Delos and Narona," 233–36.

95 Lindhagen, "The Freedmen Milieus at Delos and Narona," 238. Dionysus being the god of wine, Hermes the god of commerce, and Apollo the patron god of the island.

96 Lindhagen, "The Freedmen Milieus at Delos and Narona," 240. One in the House of the Masks, the other in the aptly named House of Dionysus.

know that many of these Roman-Italians were not merely independent entrepreneurs, but came from wealthy family networks that included equestrians and even some senators.[97] The most prominent men—for there were, most certainly, many more Roman-Italians whose lower rank and finances prohibited them from leaving as great a mark on the archaeological record—were of too great a status to afford spending much time personally overseeing their business on Delos. Extended periods away from Rome or Italy would see their commercial, social, and political networks atrophy, an especially grave concern for such notable individuals.[98] Owners and patrons therefore had few alternatives to entrusting their business on the island to the stewardship of their most trusted enslaved or freed persons, creating a dynamic similar to that in elite rural villas, only with a large, perilous sea separating the two groups. We may therefore presume that the enslaved and freed inhabitants of Delos had a greater degree of freedom for the vast majority the year, when their owners or patrons were away.

With such a loose leash, we should expect the enslaved and freed persons of Roman-Italian merchants to have exercised a greater degree of freedom and autonomy than in contexts where the owner or patron could regularly and directly surveil members of his *familia*. This is exactly what we find in the houses of more well-to-do freed persons, such as the so-called House of Tullius in the Stadium District, a

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[97] For a useful listing of senatorial *nomina* recorded at Delos, as well as a discussion of the level of involvement in Delian trade from these familiae, see Rauh, *The Sacred Bonds of Commerce*, 234–43.
[98] Rauh, *The Sacred Bonds of Commerce*, 228, 43.

well-removed neighborhood in the northeast corner of the island (fig. 17).[99] A small, richly decorated abode, its second floor housed a bronze statue of the proprietor, Quintus Tullius, the only surviving piece of which is the marble column base on which it stood. This base contains a bilingual Greek-and-Latin dedication to Tullius by his three Greek freedmen, Aristarchus, Alexander, Herakleon "for his virtue and benefaction."[100] By the entrance stands an exterior shrine with seven layers of plastered painting around it, most of which depict ceremonies related to the cult of the Lares Compitales, spirits responsible for guarding a neighborhood and its crossroads. The most recent layer (fig. 18) shows a scene of the type of sacrifice that would have regularly taken place at the *compitum*, with three men in hooded togas[101] observing the sacrifice. As Nicholas Rauh argues, these figures probably represent the freedmen who dedicated the statue of Quintus Tullius, which, in combination with the house's modest accommodations, supports an identification of Aristarchus, Alexander, and Herakleon as the primary residents. There exists comparable evidence for this phenomenon at other modest Delian residences, like the House of Philostratos,[102]

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[99] The following description of the house derives from Rauh, *The Sacred Bonds of Commerce*, 196–202.

[100] Trans. Rebecca Benefiel and Peter Keegan, eds., *Inscriptions in the Private Sphere in the Greco-Roman World* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2016), 57.

[101] Trümper describes the men as "in toga praetexta *capite velato*": Monika Trümper, "Delos Beyond East and West. Cultural Choices in Domestic Architecture," in *Common Dwelling Place of All the Gods: Commagene in its Local, Regional and Global Hellenistic Context*, ed. Michael Blömer *et al.* (Stuttgart, Germany: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2021), 531.

[102] Rauh, *The Sacred Bonds of Commerce*, 200.

which similarly housed a statue dedication by three freedmen, and House I-D,[103] whose *compitum* contains graffiti explicitly naming two individuals who were likely enslaved or freed. Assuming Rauh's line of reasoning is correct, the Tullian freedmen lived in the security and comfort of their home and, until their patron returned to check in on them, were functionally (*de facto*) the same as their freeborn counterparts on the island. While the erection of the statue might mean that they felt and exercised genuine loyalty to their former owner, it could just as easily have been a method of appeasement. By currying favor with Quintus whenever he visited Delos, the Tullian freedmen could have ensured that they retained their autonomy when their patron was away for the rest of the year.

Similar scenarios can be found in the so-called House of the Seals and the House of Hermes. The former is associated with bankers from the Aufidia family, due to a combination of the closed-off arrangement of the rooms, stamps from an archive of business contracts, and two busts that likely depict Aufidius *major* and *minor* (whose identities are known from external evidence).[104] The bottom floor of this residence was very simply decorated and crammed with exorbitant quantities of ceramic material, indicating a connection between the owners and the wine trade. While the upper floor was more richly decorated with mosaics and wall paintings, the House of the Seals was, all the same, too cramped for members of such a prominent

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[103] Rauh, *The Sacred Bonds of Commerce*, 202 n.18.
[104] Rauh, *The Sacred Bonds of Commerce*, 215–18.

family to have spent regular time here. Additional evidence for this comes both from a kitchen space on the first floor, which had numerous plates initialed with what are perhaps the names of enslaved members of the *gens Aufidia*,[105] and from the discovery of inscriptions naming four freedmen of the Aufidii.[106] The House of Hermes, unlike the smaller, unassuming homes discussed in this chapter, was one of the largest, most sophisticated houses on the island.[107] A dedication, made by an enslaved or freedman of Cnaeus Paconius to his fraternal companions (συνήθεσι) and to Hermes, reveals that the house was owned by the Paconii, an old Etrurian family that was active not only at Delos, but at several other centers around the Aegean.[108] The use of the term συνήθεια, the size of the house, the reference to enslaved or freed persons from different branches of the Paconii, and the complete absence of similar dedications by freeborn Paconii, indicate that the residents of the house constituted an all-inclusive brotherhood of Paconian servile and freed laborers from any branch of this family.[109] The enslaved and freed persons tied to Tullius, the Aufidii, the Paconii, and other such *familiae* therefore not only exercised a great deal of autonomy in the absence of their owners or patrons, but were also able to acquire a physical marker of their belonging within the permanent population of Delos. Whether this was through the beneficence of their (former) owners or the outright purchase of property (at least

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105 Rauh, *The Sacred Bonds of Commerce*, 216.
106 Rauh, *The Sacred Bonds of Commerce*, 219.
107 Rauh, *The Sacred Bonds of Commerce*, 219–23.
108 Rauh, *The Sacred Bonds of Commerce*, 223–24.
109 Rauh, *The Sacred Bonds of Commerce*, 225–27.

some freedmen could become quite wealthy through their involvement in the island's trade, as evidenced by the opulent House of Hermes), the result was the same. Enslaved and freed person would have been expected to account for any negligence upon the return of their patron or owner, but for the rest of the year, there would have been little to distinguish them from freeborn Delian inhabitants.

The original position of Delos as a religious center continued into the Hellenistic period, influencing the ways in which groups coalesced and expressed their community. Despite their pervasive presence and shared activities on the island, Roman-Italian merchants and their enslaved and freed persons did not organize themselves into one cohesive group, but rather in associations centered on devotion to a particular god or group of gods. The most prominent of these were the *Hermiastai*, *Poseidoniastai*, *Apolloniastai*, and *Compitaliastai*, whose members respectively worshiped Hermes and his mother Maia, Poseidon, Apollo, and the Compitales,[110] sometimes alongside additional gods.[111] Their dedications can be found in large quantities throughout every *agora* except that of the Italians,[112] and they served both the practical function of listing the association's current officers and the religious function of honoring those gods (or other entities) with influence over their

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110 Crysta Kaczmarek, "Living in the Liminal: *Lares Compitales* Shrines, Freedmen and Identity in Delos," in *Housing in the Ancient Mediterranean World: Material and Textual Approaches*, ed. J. A. Baird and April Pudsey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

111 Rauh, *The Sacred Bonds of Commerce*, 29, 107–08.

112 Rauh, *The Sacred Bonds of Commerce*, 81.

activities.[113] Unsurprisingly, the composition of these groups appears to have been driven by the most pressing concerns of its members. Looking at dedications from the so-called Agora of the *Compitaliastai* (also sometimes called the Agora of the *Hermiastai*[114]), the names of *Hermiastai* officers—whose patron deity oversaw, among other things, travel and commerce—appear to be exclusively Roman-Italian.[115] Meanwhile, the dozen or so dedications from the *Compitaliastai* point to a group comprised largely of enslaved or freed persons tied to Roman-Italian *familiae*, one example being Quintus Tullius Herakleon (from the House of Tullius), who is listed as an officer of the association for the year 98/97 BCE.[116] Scholars have used this onomastic evidence, in conjunction with information from places like the House of Tullius, to identify more than twenty-five houses with *compita* as the homes of enslaved or freed persons, who may have been part of the *Compitaliastai*.[117] The sharp distinction in social status between the two associations should come as no surprise, given the diverging interests of enslaved or freed agents and their far-removed owners or patrons. While the primary concern for Roman-Italian *Hermiastai* was the safe transport of their wares (and themselves) to and from Delos, *Compitaliastai* were more concerned with domestic issues, namely the safety of their

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113 Rauh, *The Sacred Bonds of Commerce*, 110.
114 Kaczmarek, "Living in the Liminal: *Lares Compitales* Shrines, Freedmen and Identity in Delos," 366.
115 Rauh, *The Sacred Bonds of Commerce*, 97–105.
116 Rauh, *The Sacred Bonds of Commerce*, 109–14, 202.
117 Rauh, *The Sacred Bonds of Commerce*, 203.

homes and neighborhoods.[118] On a more practical level, organizing according to status would have provided some level of collective leverage (possibly against their overseers) and camaraderie with each other due to their shared role in the commerce of the island.

Less official forms of a religiously centered community may also have been present on Delos, and here we see opportunities for people of different backgrounds to identify with each other based on their shared role in the overall commerce of the port, rather than their social or occupational status. In addition to the plethora of dedications by Roman-Italian merchants and the enslaved and freed persons connected to them, some inscriptions by Arab merchants have also been discovered in the Agora of Theophrastos, the Kynthios (a sanctuary at the base of Mount Kynthos), and the temples of Serapis, Artemis, and Apollo.[119] While it is not surprising that Arabs would express their devotion on foreign shores, it is significant that they chose to broadcast their fealty in the same religious spaces as their Greco-Roman peers. By participating within the parameters of their local context, rather than cordoning themselves off into an "Arab quarter," Arab merchants may also have expressed some solidarity with the other groups participating in and facilitating the international trade on which their collective livelihoods depended. In addition to conducting business with and alongside

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[118] Such domestic-oriented concerns then beg the question of whether local Delians participated in the compital ceremonies of freed agents. Could the two groups have joined together in solidarity as co-inhabitants of an island so often invaded by foreign businesspeople?

[119] Graf, "Arabs in the Aegean in the Early Hellenistic Period," 202–03; Sørensen and Geus, "Minaeans in the Mediterranean," 128–31.

Roman-Italians or local Delians, they would have shared in the same basic religious practice, further highlighting their similarities in commerce and business. While these Arabs likely hailed from wealthy families back home, and so would fall outside this paper's focus on non-elites, the port-centered communal dynamic illustrated by their dedications may also have been present among the non-elite groups on the island. The native Delians and enslaved or freed agents surely felt an even greater attachment to the port (this being their home, rather than one stop of many along a trade route) and so may have likewise established some level of social connection with the hordes of foreign merchants arriving to engage in the international trade on Delos.

Chapter 4

BERENIKE: COMMUNITY IN ISOLATION

The Egyptian port of Berenike on the Red Sea provides evidence of similar international activity and relation-building as that at Delos, albeit on a far grander scale and with important distinctions. Though it later became a link to the diverse trade of the Indian ocean, Berenike began as a simple cog in the war machine of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Founded in the third century BCE by Ptolemy II Philadelphos (r. 284–246 BCE, the port was primarily responsible for importing African elephants; though the Ptolemies were also interested in non-pachyderm trade with southern Arabia and India, this was, at least initially, secondary to the elephants.[120] Acquired from hunting stations in modern-day Sudan and Eritrea, these animals were shipped to Berenike on specially designed boats known as *elephantegoi*, moved across the Eastern Desert to the Nile River, trained for military service, and finally shipped northward to be used in the army.[121] The Mediterranean world's first exposure to these animals was through Alexander the Great's eastern conquests, which went as far as the Indus River Valley, where the Indian kingdoms used elephants as the ancient equivalent of tanks. Despite the impracticality of importing, maintaining, and controlling elephants in battle (one could never be totally sure that an elephant would

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120 Steven E. Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 32.
121 Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*, 5.

not trample over friendly troops instead of the enemy formation[122]), the Ptolemies and their chief rival, the Seleucid kingdom, were captivated by the size and destructive potential of these intelligent giants. The two therefore competed in an arms race, the Seleucids acquiring Indian elephants from their eastern borders and the Ptolemies importing African elephants through Berenike (and possibly some of their other ports along the Red Sea). This race does not seem to have lasted long, though, as evidence for the importation of elephants from the Red Sea drops off after the reign of Ptolemy IV Philopater (r. 221–205 BCE).[123]

The port saw a rebirth with the late first-century BCE occupation of Egypt by the Romans, who recognized and invested in the potential profits from the Indian Ocean trade (see fig. 19), rather than the importation of unreliable beasts of war. Based on literary and epigraphic sources, it seems that the facilities at Berenike were dramatically built out sometime between the reigns of Tiberius (r. 14–37 CE) and the Flavian dynasty (r. 69–96 CE).[124] There were at least two harbors, one to the northeast that likely served smaller boats or more regional commerce, and another larger one to the southwest, where more substantial vessels—potentially engaged in the international trade with Southern Arabia and India—probably anchored (see fig. 20).[125] The Roman settlement was built east of the original Ptolemaic facilities and,

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[122] For examples of such mishaps, see the Battle of Beneventum (Plut. *Pyrrh.* 25), the Battle of Raphia (Polyb. 85), and the siege of Numantia (App. *Hisp.* 46).
[123] Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*, 53.
[124] Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*, 62–63.
[125] Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*, 60–61.

due to aggressive silting, some of the more westerly harbor works from the Roman era were eventually abandoned and had to be rebuilt further east to counter the receding shoreline.[126] Wine was by far Berenike's primary export to the east, as shown by the prevalence of wine-related declarations on the customs passes discovered in the town's trash dump,[127] while some of the more prominent eastern imports were, unsurprisingly, spices (*e.g.*, black pepper) and incense (*e.g.*, frankincense and myrrh), for which the port had a dedicated, yet still unlocated, warehouse.[128]

Berenike was, for all intents and purposes, even more of an island than Delos thanks to the barren Eastern Desert separating the Red Sea from the Nile River. The settlement had to rely primarily on imports from the Nile, the ocean trade, or both for many of its needs: certain foodstuffs (beef, pork, and some fruits), fine pottery, timber, textiles, and specially crafted objects like sculpture.[129] The population ebbed and flowed with the monsoon sailing seasons, with many people likely coming to work during the peak periods of activity before returning to their homes on the Nile or

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126 Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*, 61–62.

127 Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*, 232. For further details on the contents of discarded documents, see: Rodney Ast and Roger S. Bagnall, *Documents from Berenike. Volume III: Greek and Latin Texts from the 2009–2013 Seasons*, Papyrologica Bruxellensia, (Brusells: Association Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 2016); Rodney Ast, "Berenike in Light of Inscriptions, Ostraca, and Papyri," in *The Eastern Desert of Egypt during the Greco-Roman Period: Archaeological Reports*, ed. Jean-Pierre Brun, Thomas Faucher, and Steven E. Sidebotham (Paris: Collège de France, 2018).

128 Rodney Ast and Roger S. Bagnall, "The Receivers of Berenike. New Inscriptions from the 2015 Season," *Chiron* 45 (2015): 174–75.

129 Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*, 78–80, 229–31, 39–42; Steven E. Sidebotham *et al.*, "Indians in Roman Berenike," *Jahrbuch des Deutsches Archäologisches Institut* 140 (2025): 268–69, https://doi.org/10.34780/n31wrw90.

elsewhere in the desert.[130] We catch a potential glimpse of this cycle through a fragmentary letter from Aphrodite(?)[131] to her husband Lucius in Berenike, in which, among other things, she assures him that she "lack[s] nothing," is "not useless," and that he should "not worry about us."[132] It is not clear to whom else Aphrodite is referring, but two candidates are Aphrodite's father-in-law, whom she mentions earlier in the letter ("your father tells me…") and who might have lived nearby, or, alternatively, whatever children the couple may have had and whom Aphrodite was caring for in Lucius's absence. In either case, Aphrodite clearly wished to assuage her husband's worries about her ability to carry on without him, indicating that their separation was a longer-term one. It is possible that Lucius traveled to Berenike as a seasonal worker, leaving behind his family with the expectation that they would be reunited once the peak of shipping had died down. Another potential trace of seasonal workers is an ostrakon (fig. 21) discovered in the northern part of the site, probably an Egyptian shrine or cult center.[133] The sherd contains a short list of different terms related to ships and sailing, something with no obvious connection to the building itself, so it is likely an unintentional deposition. This list might represent a sort of

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130 Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*, 68.

131 The manuscript has only "Ἀφρο," likely an abbreviation for either Aphrodite or some similar Greek name.

132 Roger S. Bagnall *et al.*, *Documents from Berenike. Volume II: Greek and Latin Texts from the 1999–2001 Seasons*, Papyrologica Bruxellensia, (Brusells: Association Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 2005), 43–45 (no. 130).

133 Steven E. Sidebotham *et al.*, "Results of the Winter 2024 Excavation Season at Berenike (Red Sea Coast), Egypt," *Thetis*, no. 29 (2025).

"cheat sheet" for a literate, novice sailor or dockworker still learning the literal ropes. Such evidence points to Berenike's existence as a town that lived and died by its international trade, the only incentive for anyone to live there, whether permanently or seasonally.

In contrast to these examples of a frontier outpost dominated by male workers, evidence of families and independent women living in Berenike (even if only during the peak shipping period) paints a more diverse picture of the port. The remains of a middle-aged woman, a (tentatively identified) young woman, an adolescent, two children, and a prematurely or newly born infant have been discovered across the site's formal and informal burial sites.[134] Excavations in the port itself have produced jewelry and aesthetic architectural elements like plaster, textiles, and carpets that hid houses' rough coral walls,[135] indicating that at least some residences were considered homes, not just habitats. Residents may also have tended kitchen gardens, with crops like garlic, watermelon, cucumbers, beets, and several different herb species appearing as likely candidates for local cultivation.[136] One woman, named Philotera, may have even lived on her own. At the very least, she had enough personal finances to erect

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134 Iwona Zych and Marek A. Woźniak, "An Early Roman Burial Ground in Berenike on the Red Sea Coast of Egypt," *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean* 31 (2022): 265–73, https://doi.org/10.37343/uw.2083-537X.pam31.11.

135 Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*, 76.

136 René T. J. Cappers, *Roman Foodprints at Berenike: Archaeobotanical Evidence of Subsistence and Trade in the Eastern Desert of Egypt* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California, 2006), 140–43.

two dedicatory stones to Zeus in her own name,[137] which would have been impossible had she simply used her husband's money. Another woman, Hikane, provides hints of her situation in Berenike through a letter to her son Isidoros—a "harbor man" (ὡρμίτος) working somewhere along the Red Sea— in which she reprimands him for failing to acknowledge her by letter or visit her in Berenike, like some of his siblings had.[138] There is no mention of her husband in the letter,[139] and Hikane even says, "I have no one" (οὐδένα γάρ ἔχο), so it is very likely that she was a widow living (and presumably working) alone in Berenike. While we will likely never know how Philotera or Hikane made their respective livings, for them to have some sort of role in the commercial activity of the port would not be anomalous. Two ostraka from the more northerly Red Sea port of Myos Hormos reference a female agent named Isidora, and there is evidence that prostitutes were active in the Eastern Desert[140] (including at forts in the vicinity of Berenike[141]). While these are two very specific examples based on evidence external to Berenike, it is hard to believe that the same economic forces at Myos Hormos (also a conduit for international trade with Arabia and India) would not

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137 Bagnall *et al.*, *Documents from Berenike. Volume II*, 21–22 (no. 118–19).

138 Bagnall *et al.*, *Documents from Berenike. Volume II*, 41–43 (no. 129).

139 There is mention of an Amarantos (a male Greek name), but the surrounding words do not clarify his relationship to either Hikane or Isidoros. Amarantos could therefore just as easily be a sibling, uncle, or friend.

140 Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*, 76, 78.

141 For discussion of some of the ostraka found at these forts, see Hélène Cuvigny, "Rotating Women: Remarks on Prostitution in the Roman Garrisons of the Desert of Berenike," in *Rome in Egypt's Eastern Desert: Volume Two*, ed. Roger S. Bagnall (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

lead to similar economic engagement on the part of women, or that these were the only two options for such engagement.

We require less inference for a sizable contingent of freed, male agents working at Berenike, though the evidence is still not quite so robust as at Delos. The graffiti of travelers to and from Berenike are preserved in a popular rock shelter along the road between Berenike and Koptos.[142] While the authors of these graffiti represent several different time periods, languages, backgrounds, and statuses (particularly freed), the cave provides little evidence for high-status individuals making the trek across the desert to manage their affairs in person. A prominent example of such elites is Marcus Laelius Cosmus,[143] a "merchant of the Red Sea" who sponsored renovations to (or perhaps built the earliest Roman version of[144]) the most prominent building of the site, the temple of Isis, goddess of the sea (fig. 22). Cosmus was likely involved in the wine trade—the documented Marci Laelii of the Tiberian period come overwhelmingly from the port of Puteoli, where most Campanian wine was exported eastward. Of the four inscriptions in the temple naming Cosmus, two also name the freedman Epaphroditus, who set up the dedications and likely worked in Berenike as a representative for his absent patron, one cog in a larger network of wine trade.

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142 Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*, 71–72.

143 Rodney Ast, "Italian Merchants and Roman Trade at Berenike under the Julio-Claudian Emperors," in *Merchants, Measures, and Money. Understanding Technologies of Early Trade in a Comparative Perspective. Proceedings of Two Workshops Funded by the European Research Council (ERC)*, ed. Lorenz Rahmstorf, Gojko Barjamovic, and Nicola Ialongo (Wachholtz Verlag, 2021), 143–47.

144 Steven E. Sidebotham, personal communication.

Numerous other freed and enslaved individuals served similar roles for absentee merchants and public (sometimes imperial) officials, "receiv[ing] deliveries of grain on behalf of the public treasury… provisioning crews, organising the loading and unloading of ships, storing goods in the warehouses, paying for services, [and] communicating with craftsmen such as the stonecutters who carved inscriptions and the sculptors who created dedicatory statues."[145] Unlike at Delos, however, there have been no discoveries pointing to the formation, formal or informal, of bonds between these agents at Berenike. This could either be due to the incomplete state of the excavations (98% of the site remains unexcavated as of 2026) or because of the mix of agents whose patrons were private businesspeople and imperial officials, which may have created a layer of friction not apparent at Delos.

There may also have been an element of ethnic pride and resistance to Romanization among certain Greco-Egyptian workers at Berenike. The ostraka from an early Roman trash dump at the site record a marked rise in both uncommon Greek names and mixed Greek-Egyptian filiation ("[Greek name] son of [Egyptian name]" and vice versa), the latter of which is a phenomenon seen in other parts of Egypt during the early Roman period.[146] As Bagnall *et al*. tentatively remark, the popularity of "very Greek" names may have been intended by parents to stress the Greekness of

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145 Ast, "Italian Merchants and Roman Trade at Berenike under the Julio-Claudian Emperors," 147.
146 Roger S. Bagnall, Christina Helms, and Arthur M. F. W. Verhoogt, *Documents from Berenike. Volume I: Greek and Latin Texts from the 1996-1998 Seasons*, Papyrologica Bruxellensia, (Brusells: Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 2000), 28–30.

themselves and their children in response to the recent Roman occupation, which (to expand upon the theory) may also have been the motivation behind the alternating usage of Greek and Egyptian names. The archaeology and epigraphy of Berenike and its environs indicate a sustained military presence to defend the port, safekeep its water supply, and help collect customs.[147] Such "nativist" naming conventions would therefore have had a present effect on how Greco-Egyptians saw themselves in contrast to the occupying Romans, and possibly also to the myriad foreign merchants. The attraction of laborers from all over Egypt may also have brought some people into closer contact with the Roman state than they might have otherwise, further encouraging this type of ethnic self-identification.

Yet, despite the potentially resistive inclination of certain workers at Berenike, the port was still characterized by its cosmopolitanism thanks to the role it played in international trade, which it could only take part in with support from the Roman state. Merchants hailed from the Mediterranean, Egypt itself, Axum, sub-Saharan Africa, Palmyra, Nabataea, southern Arabia, India and Sri Lanka,[148] but the most extensive evidence for the lives of foreign merchants comes from Indians. The discoveries of pieces from three Buddha statuettes (figs. 23-25) and two largely intact stelae—one depicting Vrishni heroes (fig. 26) and another with a bilingual inscription in Sanskrit and Greek (figs. 27-28)—have shined a spotlight on just how intertwined with the

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147 Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*, 66–67, 69, 75–76.
148 Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*, 69.

community of Berenike some merchants from India became. Each of these objects is made of local anhydritic gypsum (Berenikean, or at least Egyptian), except for one of the statuettes, which is marble, probably imported from Paros via Alexandria. The statuettes and the Vrishni stela were probably worked by craftsmen who came themselves to Berenike during the peak sailing season, when the demand for their services would have been the greatest.[149] The statuettes, in particular, highlight a unique blending of Indian type—posture, gestures, garments, drapery, iconography—with Greco-Roman technique and execution, the result of sculptors using familiar models and approaches to render unfamiliar designs, presumably with input or guidance from their commissioners.[150] The bilingual inscription, meanwhile, gives textual expression to what these artistic objects attempt to express. It contains three full lines of Sanskrit in the Brahmi script, which are bracketed by one word of Greek at the top of the stela (possibly a graffito) and two at the bottom:

> (Greek) Good (fortune) (?).
> (Sanskrit) Success. In the sixth, 6th, year of king Philippa, (on) the 5th (day) of the bright (half of the month) Āśva(yuja), on this day the kṣatriya Vāsula had established an image of [...], for the benefit and pleasure of all beings.
> (Greek) Vazulas set it up.[151]

The dedication, which follows a dating formula from northwest India, was erected on September 9th, 248 along with an image of some sort (possibly one of the Buddhas

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149 Sidebotham *et al.*, "Indians in Roman Berenike," 237, 68–69.
150 Sidebotham *et al.*, "Indians in Roman Berenike," 253–68.
151 Sidebotham *et al.*, "Indians in Roman Berenike," 272–73.

discovered nearby, but a lacuna precludes any certain determination on this front).[152] Whether Vasula or a fellow Indian with more expertise carved the inscription, the sparing Greek of the final line may point to the inscriber having basic familiarity with the local language and script, enough to transliterate the dedicant's name and conjugate the appropriate verb. Were a native hellenophone responsible for inscribing the Greek, it would be an odd choice to write such a short message to accompany the more detailed Sanskrit.

Though the Indian dedicants of the Isis temple were almost certainly elites—Vasula came from the *kṣatriya*, the warrior class in the Indian *varṇa* system,[153] and the cost of dedications would also have been quite high—they provide a potential glimpse into a port-centric communal dynamic similar to that shown by the Arabs trading and living at Delos. Indian merchants expressed their unique identity within the mode of their local context, thereby claiming a place in the social fabric of Berenike. In taking up the "Greco-Roman and Egyptian practice of offering in any temple images of any god including foreign deities,"[154] they placed themselves alongside Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, and other external ethnic groups[155] who made dedications in this shared religious space, whose importance to their mutual business

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[152] Sidebotham *et al.*, "Indians in Roman Berenike," 274–75.
[153] Sidebotham *et al.*, "Indians in Roman Berenike," 275.
[154] Sidebotham *et al.*, "Indians in Roman Berenike," 278.
[155] As a further example, see the dedication of merchants from Meroë (modern-day Sudan). Olaf E. Kaper, "Berenike as a Harbour for Meroe: New Evidence for Meroitic Presence on the Read Sea Coast," *Der Antike Sudan* 32 (2021): 57–62.

of maritime trade cannot be overstated. They not only publicized the culture of their homeland, but also promoted their economic success and semi-permanent ties to the port. In leaving such permanent, conspicuous markers of their presence, these merchants claimed some level of belonging in the port. While this may have been in a purely commercial sense, we must also entertain the idea that the connections made with other groups at the port extended deeper, to the social level. Just as the participants in Delian trade a few centuries earlier might have bonded across their cultural and social differences, so too might freed agents, Greco-Egyptian workers, and international merchants have felt some solidarity with each other as they converged at Berenike, perpetuating the port's commerce and its community.

CONCLUSION: FINDING ROMAN COMMUNITIES

Across Ostia-Portus, Delos, and Berenike, we have seen many groups with a diversity of social statuses, places of origin, labor backgrounds, and personal relations to the Roman government, the entity ultimately responsible for facilitating the activities of these ports. The commercial environment of Ostia and Portus—each port crucial to the other's success—stimulated an intensely social existence centered on one's work. Labor associations met everywhere from dedicated guild seats to the numerous bars dotting the streets of Ostia, and people like the tool sharpener Verrius could also embed themselves within these communities. So too at Delos and Berenike, only with a greater cosmopolitan foundation that may have united those staying at a port for extended periods (*e.g.*, native Delians, freed agents, Indian merchants). Whether or not this was the case, workers would have found themselves caught between, on the one hand, their reliance upon the support of the state for the continued prosperity of their collective home and, on the other hand, their distrust or fear of seemingly arbitrary regulations imposed by the emperors.

This study has, at its core, been an experiment. Not in a science lab or with surveys of still-living respondents, but in the classical scholar's mind, re-examining how we as researchers approach our mission so that we may pry new knowledge from the greedy fist of time. By remaining open to the synthesis of any and all types of data, this thesis has demonstrated the value of interdisciplinarity for unlocking new interpretations of old information, which can help us arrive at a better (if still flawed) understanding of non-elites and how they conceived their place in the world. This type

of work—both in my personal academic journey and in classical studies writ large—is still in its early stages and will require much more hard-fought progress. The particular application in this paper (namely, the study of Roman port laborers) matters less as a product than as a process that will inform my future work on the difficult questions surrounding non-elites. Ultimately, this analysis of non-elite perspectives has been successful in moving me closer to the many unseen—yet still visible—people who populated the ancient world.

FIGURES

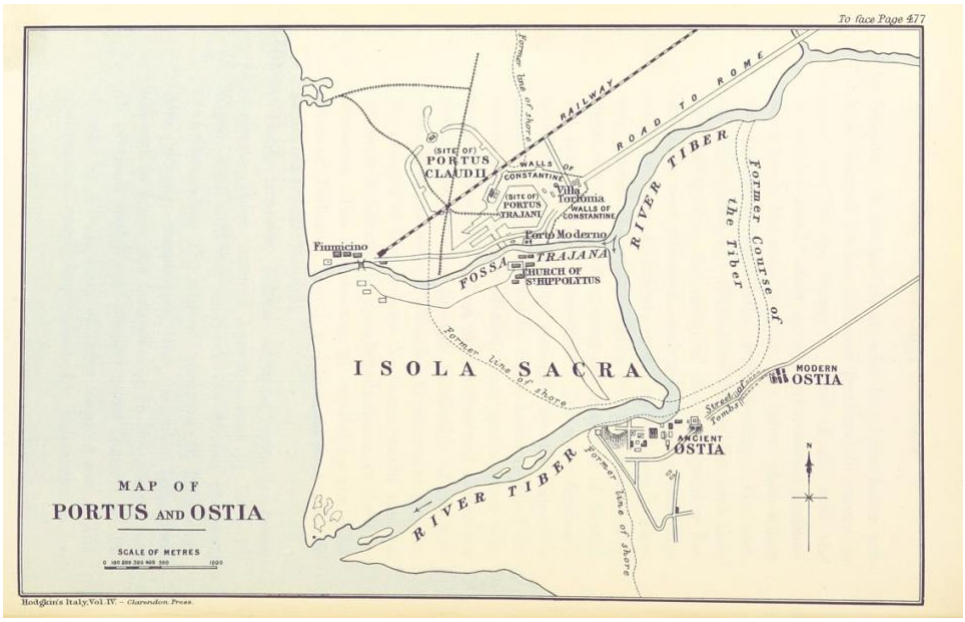

Figure 1. Map of Portus and Ostia in the modern period; map by Thomas Hodgkin, British Library Flickr Commons, https://flickr.com/photos/12403504@N02/11216276573, public domain

Figure 2. Example of a Roman bar, Ostia; Flickr, https://flickr.com/photos/34585612@N00/31874966127, licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

Figure 3. Plan of Portus, Ostia, and Isola Sacra; Keay *et al.* 2020, fig. 7.1

Figure 4. Mosaic in Hall of the Grain Measurers, Ostia; photo by Jamie Heath, Flickr, https://flickr.com/photos/184393744@N06/49356554408, licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

Figure 5. View of Square of the Guilds from the theater, Ostia; photo by Dennis Jarvis, Flickr, https://flickr.com/photos/22490717@N02/5149153196, licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

Figure 6. Left relief panel of Tomb 29, Isola Sacra necropolis; Daoust 2022, fig. 1

Figure 7. Front relief panel of Tomb 29, Isola Sacra necropolis; Daoust 2022, fig. 3

Figure 8. Right relief panel of Tomb 29, Isola Sacra necropolis; Daoust 2022, fig. 2

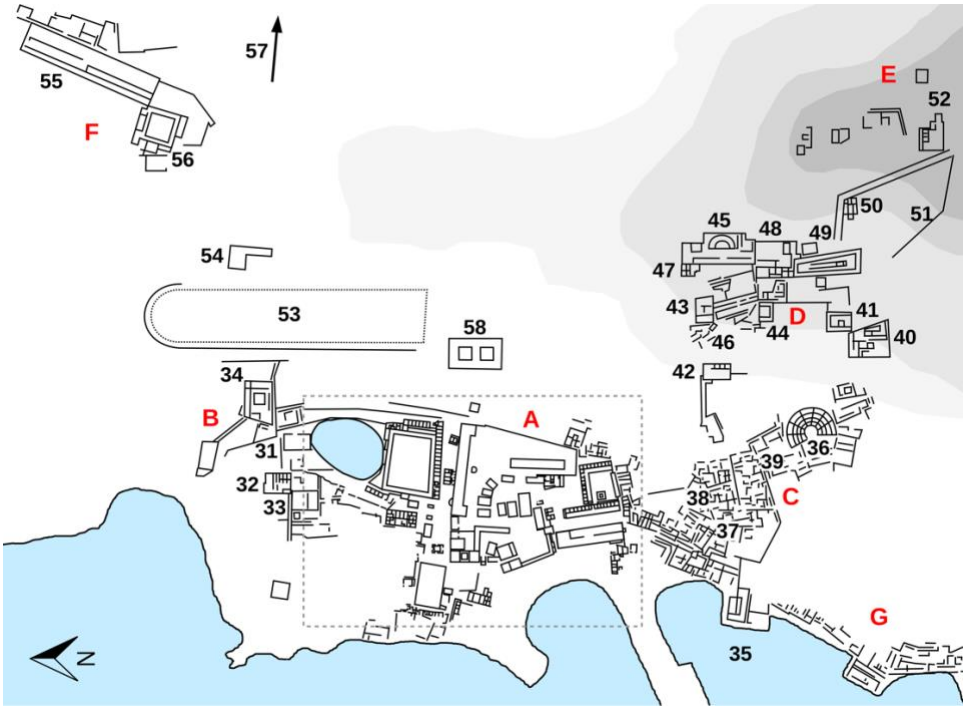

Figure 9. Plan of Delos; Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Plan_Delos_full.svg, licensed under CC BY 4.0

Figure 10. Plan of Sanctuary of Apollo and surrounding structures, Delos; Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Plan_Delos_Sacred_Area.svg, licensed under CC BY 4.0

Figure 11. Plan of Houses IC & ID (first phase), Delian Stadium District; Zarmakoupi 2013, fig. 4

Figure 12. Plan of Houses IC & ID (second phase), Delian Stadium District; Zarmakoupi 2013, fig. 5

Figure 13. Plan of House of the Seals (first phase), Delian Skardhana District; Zarmakoupi 2022, fig. 2

Figure 14. Plan of House of the Seals (second phase), Delian Skardhana District; Zarmakoupi 2022, fig. 3

Figure 15. Plan of olive oil workshop in House III-O, Delian Theater District; Brun 2000, fig. 5

Figure 16. Plan of perfumery in House I-B, Delian Theater District; Brun 2000, fig. 7

Figure 17. Plan of Insulae I & II, Delian Theater District; Zarmakoupi 2013, fig. 2

Figure 18. Layers of painting surround *compitum* at entrance of House of Tullius, Delian Stadium District. Possible depiction of Tullian freedmen at lower left; Trümper 2021, fig. 10

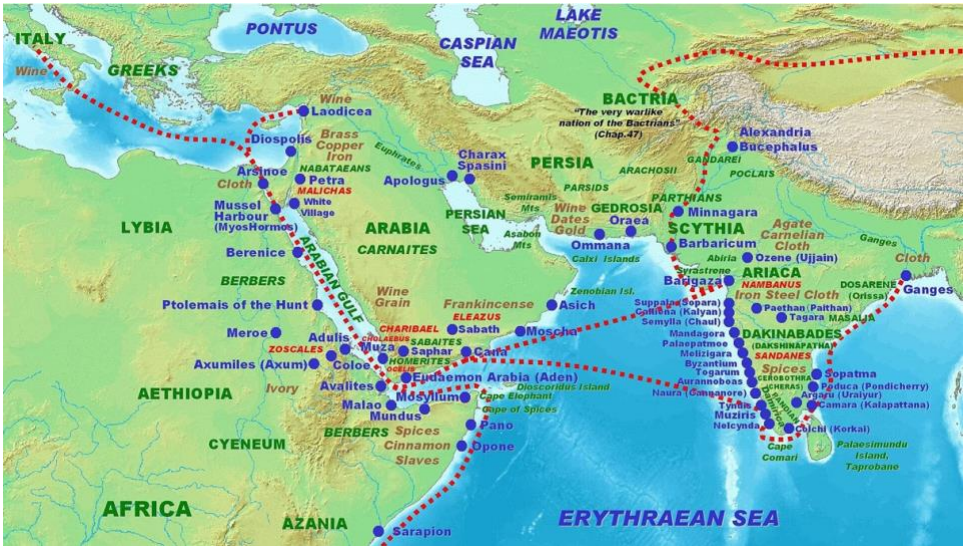

Figure 19. Map of trade routes according to the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*; Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indo-Roman_trade.jpg, licensed under CC BY 4.0

Figure 20. Reconstruction of Roman Berenike; Ast 2021, fig. 2 (by Martin Hense)

Figure 21. Ostrakon with list of ship- and sailing-related terms, Berenikean northern complex; Sidebotham *et al.* 2025 (*Thetis*), Pl. XXXI

Figure 22. Orthophoto of Isis temple, Berenike, at the end of the 2025 winter excavations; by Szymon Popławsi

Figure 23. 3D reconstruction joining body and nimbed head of marble Buddha statuette, Berenikean Isis temple; Sidebotham *et al.* 2025 (DAI), fig. 19

Figure 24. Head of Buddha statuette, Berenikean Isis temple; Sidebotham *et al.* 2025 (DAI), fig. 13

Figure 25. Headless stone Buddha statuette, Berenikean northern complex; Sidebotham *et al.* 2025 (DAI), fig. 20

Figure 26. Stela depicting three Vrishni heroes, Berenikean Isis temple; Sidebotham *et al.* 2025 (DAI), fig. 9

Figure 27. Stela with bilingual inscription in Sanskrit (Brahmi script) and Greek, Berenikean Isis temple; Sidebotham *et al.* 2025 (DAI), fig. 49

Figure 28. Bilingual stela with extant Sanskrit outlined in green, Greek in black; Sidebotham *et al.* 2025 (DAI), fig. 51

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