

In the Name of Gods and the Market.

Organisation and Self-Definition of Italian Traders in the Hellenistic Mediterranean

Francesca Diosono

The 2nd c. B.C. saw the expanding of commercial activities of Italian mercatores in the wider Mediterranean: in the East they faced earlier economic models expressing a different culture, in the West they settled in a territory conquered militarily. For a long time, professional associations had existed in the Roman-Italian as a form of community, in which religion not only served the purpose of identification, but was also only one aspect of the activities of the group. This paper focuses on how similar organisations were re-established in the new contexts of mercantile activity, with a particular emphasis on the process of linguistic and cultural translation which happened in the East. Moreover, the paper will investigate the Italians' attempt to adapt their public communication to local customs via numerous bilingual inscriptions, where the Latin text is not always identical to the Greek one. These pieces of evidence are then correlated with contemporary texts from Italy to highlight similarities and differences, demonstrating the extent to which the diffusion and role of this type of association have been underestimated, as well as their formal homogeneity and the complexity of the social stratification at play in this Mediterranean economic network. A detailed analysis is made of the religious element present in merchant associations, starting with the oldest one in Rome, that of the Mercuriales; particular attention is paid to the cult of the Lares (as it was characterized before the Augustan reform) as a means of strengthening the ties between the mercatores and their slaves and freedmen, especially in the East. These associations of merchants and entrepreneurs from Italy display a remarkable ability to adapt their original formulas and characteristics to the different socio-economic contexts in which they operate, providing further insight into their commercial expansion.

Italian mercatores and negotiatores in the Mediterranean in the Late Republican Period

Italian merchants crossed the Mediterranean from east to west, trading also in territories not formally subjected to the expanding dominion of Rome¹⁸. Therefore, they found themselves having to interact with many different realities, cultures and political systems and consequently having to behave and communicate differently depending on the respective context. In this period, Rome was part of a new Mediterranean network that was becoming more and more intensively connected. In addition to its political and military dominance, it spread its own culture and appropriated (or not) that of others: as has recently been stated, 'we might distinguish two main categories of the Other functioning in the Roman world. First, there is the Other in terms of what anthropologists call a negative self-definition. This is the stereotypical other that personified everything that an ideal definition of Roman did not entail. Secondly, there is the Other in terms of appropriation; the Other that became Roman'¹⁹. Even Italian merchants, who came mainly from central-southern Italy and not from Rome, thus constantly had to present themselves in the foreign territories where they traded and to formulate their own identity in different contexts, in which

they were nonetheless identified as belonging to Roman society. This is well reflected in the epigraphic texts of the time which provide much information about how Italians defined themselves and wanted others to see them. Sometimes merchants settled in foreign territory already before its military conquest, and sometimes as a consequence of it, but always representing Rome's commercial interests (in addition to their personal ones) and enjoying its protection, even though they were mainly not members of the socio-political elite. In some cases their desire for profit even led the Italian *mercatores* to settle in potentially hostile territories: traders were established in Carthaginian Sardinia in the mid-3rd cent. B.C.²⁰; they were present in North Africa before 146 B.C. and then massacred by Jugurtha in 112 B.C.²¹; in another massacre in the province of Asia, ordered by Mithridates in 88 B.C., allegedly 100,000 Italians perished²²; and in 21 B.C., Roman *negotiatores* were killed by the *Treviri*²³. Exposing oneself to risks by travelling by sea, in hostile territories or in climatically or socially dangerous situations was, moreover, an inherent characteristic of the profession²⁴.

18 As an example, García y Bellido 1966; van Nijf 1997; Andreau 2001; Müller – Hasenohr 2002; Verboven 2004; Verboven 2007; Verboven 2008; Maillot 2012; Tran 2014a.

19 Busch – Versluys 2015.

20 Ibba 2016, 73.

21 Sall. Iug. 21, 2; 26, 1-3; 47, 1. See Schneider 1989.

22 App. Mith. 22-23.

23 Tac. Ann. 3, 42.

24 Verboven 2004, 186.

The present paper derives from my research project on Italian merchants in the Hellenistic Mediterranean as part of the DFG Projekt 2021-2024 *‘Im Schatten des Iuppiter Anxur. Terracina und sein Heiligtum in hellenistischer Zeit’* and is particularly concerned with the direct epigraphic evidence left behind by Italian merchants and their associations, which provides information on how people saw themselves and how they wanted others to see them²⁵. The aim is to understand if and how merchants presented themselves, their activities and their role in society differently according to the diverse cultural, social, and territorial contexts in which they found themselves, what they brought of their previous Italian association experience to other places, adapting it or not to the respective setting and what they socially and culturally brought back to the city of origin from the Mediterranean markets where they carried out their commercial activities. Moreover, the very Latin term *negotatores* by which they sometimes defined themselves can be identified as an interesting neologism, first attested in Delos around 88 B.C.²⁶

Of course, inscriptions must necessarily be linked to the situation in which they were produced and in which they met specific needs, reflecting social relations, power structures, and ideology: they must have been comprehensible both to those who commissioned them and to the society they addressed²⁷. From this point of view, the epigraphic record of the various associations show how membership in a recognised organisation helped to connect individuals to wider social networks in the community. The activities that an association performed collectively contribute to maintaining the cohesion of the group's identity, but within the local context they also represented the group to the rest of the community, becoming “a way to create a sense of shared identity with specific people, and a line of differentiation with other groups”²⁸. Another important aspect is linguistics, which we will address later.

Furthermore, approaching the theme of *collegia* we must confront a long-lasting methodological question²⁹, which is, whether to privilege the professional or the religious aspect of these institutions. While a single, primary activity may have characterised the *collegium*, we must not forget that many other activities were carried out within each association as well, serving a series of related functions, which can be summarised as follows: a *collegium* was a voluntary union of people who practised the same

profession, sharing the advantages and the disadvantages of their activity; the members honoured and worshipped specific deities who protected their *collegium* and together practiced common cult rites; the *socii* presented themselves as a united group with respect to the Roman state, to high ranking personages, important administrative positions, or influential people, and, in return, their civic role and their status in the urban social hierarchy was recognised; they developed profitable, reciprocal relationships with patrons and influential public personages; the *socii* managed common property, assets, spaces and incomes, and also monopolies and state concessions; they had their own rules and an internal hierarchical organisation and could impose fines and sanctions on those members who did not respect the *collegium's* regulations, and also festive occasions, with the involvement of the association in banquets, parties, ceremonies, major gatherings, and *distributiones*. The Roman *collegia* did not rely on the rigid classifications which are typical of modern studies: for their members, professional activity was permeated with cultic activities, which led to greater cohesion and identification from various points of view. The basis on which these organisations were founded was professional and the purpose was the management of the needs and interests of their members, but the religious aspect was inseparable and associations often took their names from the main deity worshipped in them, usually the patron deity of the professional sector in which the *socii* operated³⁰.

The approach used in this study is to start by examining the attestations of organisations of *mercatores* abroad and then to compare them with earlier and contemporary cultural and organisational models from Italy, in order to understand the degree to which the associations of Italians in Sicily, the East or in *Hispania* were adapted to an economic context that had suddenly expanded along with Roman political influence.

Bilingualism and trade

Andrew Wallace-Hadrill proposed the concepts of bilingualism and code-switching as keys to understanding the cultural transformation that characterised Rome and Italy in the late Hellenistic period³¹. In this analysis we start from bilingualism in the literal sense of the term, placing it in the international commercial context of the time.

25 Noy 2010, 25.

26 Verboven 2007. On the meaning of the Latin terms *mercator* and *negotiator* and their activities, see García Brosa 1999.

27 Revell 2009.

28 Revell 2016, 96.

29 A summary in Diosono 2007 and Diosono 2015, with previous bibliography, mainly concerning the Imperial period given the greater amount of information available.

30 This dichotomy can also be found in Waltzing I, 1895, 85-90 and 195-196.

31 Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 38-103.

Trade is an activity in which cross-language communication is essential. As Clackson points out, it is proper for present-day nations to see language as a marker of individual or political identity, whereas “in the Roman Empire, both languages were employed in ways that transcend a simple categorisation of ethnic identity”.³² By the end of the 1st cent. A.D., it was accepted that the Roman Empire was essentially bilingual, in the sense that both Latin and Greek were recognised. As the emperor Claudius is quoted by Suetonius³³: *utroque sermone nostro*, both of our languages.

But the period of interest in this paper predates that in which bilingualism or multilingualism was a formally accepted (and frequently studied³⁴) aspect of political-territorial organisation. Rome’s encounter with the Greek language began long before the Hellenistic period, first through commercial and then political contacts. As the centuries of the Republican period passed, the influence of Greek culture took place on several levels: that of the elite whose members studied in Greece and conducted military campaigns and diplomatic missions there; that of the traders who crossed the Mediterranean in various directions; and that of the slaves of Eastern origin who arrived in the West. The attested instances of textual bilingualism must necessarily correspond to a much wider range of multilingual speaking that, unfortunately, escapes us. Although Latin still remained the language of Rome, Greek was accepted as an equal idiom (though not by all) and consequently used, whereas this was not the case with any other language on an official level.

When Italian merchants, between the 2nd and 1st cent. B.C., chose to communicate in Latin or Greek or both, this choice was conditioned by distinctive constellations of social, political, economic and territorial aspects. Trade from Greece and Magna Graecia brought many Greek words into Latin, while, as we shall see in the case of the *magistri* of Delos, when a Latin term would have been incomprehensible simply by being re-proposed in Greek, a cultural translation was sometimes tried, although this often resulted in somewhat mechanical translations, unusual syntax, and technical neologisms. Moreover, the Greek versions of the *negotiatores’* texts lack expressive richness, and the verbal variety of activities found in Latin (*statuerunt, dederunt, coeraverunt, fecerunt*) is matched in Greek only by the word ἀνέθηκάν³⁵. As Adams has aptly distinguished, there was a bilingualism of the elite

and one of the lower classes: “The merchant who manages to communicate in a foreign market place ... may in a sense be described as a practising ‘bilingual’, but his proficiency in the second language is at a far remove from that, say, of a foreign ambassador who delivers a speech in Latin at Rome on a political subject... It will be assumed that speakers (or writers) of two languages may have an infinitely variable range of competences in the two languages, from native fluency on the one hand to imperfect competence verging on incompetence on the other. The bilingual ‘performs’ however imperfectly, whereas the ‘non-bilingual’ has at best a few bits and pieces of passive knowledge, which he may never use”³⁶.

Thus, Italian merchants may well have had to learn Greek in the field, without having studied it, in order to integrate as well as possible in Greek-speaking societies such as the Delian; in return, members of the local societies probably were in the same situation with regard to Latin, but it is likely that most of them did not speak it at all, living in cities where Greek was the official language. For slaves of Greek origin, the acquisition of Latin was instead a necessary step towards better living conditions. Prolonged contacts over time would later lead to fluent bilinguals at all levels of the social ladder. Finally, although this is not the place for an in-depth discussion, recent studies in neuroscience and psychology related to bilingualism³⁷ show that the behaviour and abilities of these bilingual traders would have differed significantly from those who only worked in territories where their mother tongue was spoken.

Sicily

After 241 B.C. Sicily became a Roman province. Hellenistic and early 1st-cent. Sicily was largely characterised by the persistence of Greek traditions, particularly as regards systems of taxation and the economy, which the Romans modified but did not wipe out. Greek continued to be used for honorific and public inscriptions, lists of magistrates, and religious dedications. The chief interest of the provincial administration lay in the development of the agricultural potential of the island. The transformation of Sicily into a huge grain market, as well as its strategic position for the contacts with Africa, attracted some Italian traders, which moved there.

32 Clackson 2015, 85.

33 Suet. Claud. 42.

34 Adams – Janse – Swain 2002; Cooley 2002; Torres Guerra 2011; Mullen – James 2012.

35 Poccetti 1984, 650.

36 Adams 2002.

37 A summary of the issue in Bonifacci – Cappello – Bellocchi 2012.

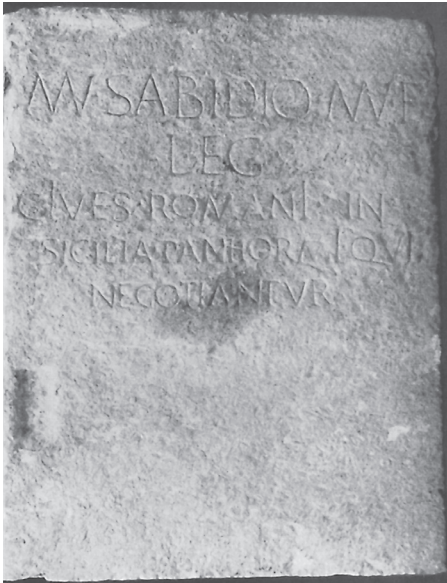


Fig. 1
Tarracina, statue base
with dedication to the
legatus M' Sabidius
by the *cives Romani* in
Sicilia Panhormi qui
negotiantur;
ILLRP 387 (ILLRP
Imagines n.169).

However, the word 'bilingualism' itself should be used with caution to describe early Roman Sicily³⁸. Many official inscriptions continued to be written in Greek until the end of the 1st cent. A.D., and this is commonly taken as proof that Greek was widely spoken in everyday communication, but we do not know enough about early Roman Sicily to conclude whether Latin was also widely spoken. It appears to have become the predominant and standard language in public administrative inscriptions by the end of Augustus' principate, while Greek remained predominant in funerary epigraphy. In early Roman Sicily, incomers showed a higher readiness to use Greek than the natives in their usage of Latin, but they probably also needed interpreters to conduct public business, as reported by Cicero about Verres³⁹. Judging from the available inscriptions, in the first centuries of the Sicilian provincia, Greek was still overwhelmingly used in public administration, as well as for dedications and honours, while Latin texts, which occur in smaller numbers, were typically produced by Romans, and are for the most part short and highly standardised: long inscriptions in Latin might have been a bad choice for communication in a mainly Greek-speaking society.

In an inscription from Syracuse dated to the 2nd cent. B.C.⁴⁰, it is unclear whether we face Roman *negotiatores* in Syracuse, using Latin with calque of Greek words and compounds, or Greek commissioners trying to express themselves in Latin: *Gn. Octavio A. f(i)lius mini(ster) coh(oris) bolonar(um)/velic(us) Vener(is) Taric(hinae) pavi-*

mentum sedi(l)ia fecit aedemque reficiend(am) coir(avit). According to Giaggiotti⁴¹, *Venus Tarichina* is the Venus protecting the workers in the fishing industry, just as the *cohors bolonarum* would be the corporation of the workers in the fishing industry, which in choosing a term to define itself as an organisation picked one of military derivation (*cohors*). Equally unusual are the choices to identify the administrator of the association with the word *velicus* and to use *minister* to define what was probably the *magister* usually attested in Italy as the temporary head of professional associations in both the Republican and Imperial periods.

Returning to Sicily, in its choice of terminology the abovementioned inscription from Syracuse appears to be the most experimental amongst a genre of texts that were traditionally quite standardised. In other cases, provincial merchants in dedications to political figures defined themselves as Italian *negotiatores* in Sicily, as in the case of the dedication to Scipio of the *Italicei* at Castel di Tusa of 193 B.C.⁴² or of the *Italicei qui Agrigenti negotiantur* of 79 B.C.⁴³ A particular case is that of the merchants who, in the time of Sulla, dedicated a statue to the *legatus* M'. Sabinus in Tarracina (Fig. 1), one of the most important Republican commercial ports in Italy, emphasizing that they were Roman citizens who traded in the port of Panormos (*cives Romani in Sicilia Panhormi qui negotiantur*⁴⁴).

Delos: between *Italikoi* and *Hermaistai*

Already the first community of foreign traders who settled in Greece, the Thracians in Athens at the end of the 5th cent. B.C., presented themselves as a simultaneously ethnic, economic, and religious association that honoured their local deity Bendis; the same behaviour characterised groups of traders from Cyprus and Egypt as well as the Phoenicians in the 4th cent. B.C.; the latter placed a sanctuary and bilingual inscriptions in Greek and Punic in Piraeus⁴⁵.

On Delos, associations have been known since the 4th cent. B.C.⁴⁶, but their situation changed completely in the late Republican age, when the island became home to the earliest and largest Roman-Italian commercial community in the Greek world. After 167 B.C. the Roman senate expelled the Delians and the island became a free port under formal Athenian supervision and ruled by an *epimeletes*. At the instigation of Rome, between the middle

38 On the different languages spoken in Sicily during this period and their interactions, see Tribulato 2012.

39 Cic. Verr. 2, 2, 108; 2, 3, 84; 2, 4, 58.

40 CIL I² 2224.

41 Giaggiotti 2002.

42 ILLRP 320.

43 ILLRP 380.

44 ILLRP 387.

45 Maillot 2012, 239.

46 Baslez 2013.