

Shipwreck cargoes in the western Mediterranean and the organization of Roman maritime trade

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Much has been written about the nature and scale of Roman maritime trade, yet there remains no detailed analysis of the range of shipwreck cargoes at our disposal and the information that they provide for the organizational aspects of maritime trade. Identifying the mechanisms through which products were traded is one of the most challenging aspects of the study of Roman trade. I will analyze the cargoes of a number of well-published and well-dated W Mediterranean wrecks between the 1st c. B.C. and the 4th c. A.D. with the aim of answering several questions:

° What processes were involved in the movement of goods from the point of production to the point of consumption?

° To what extent can shipwreck cargoes illuminate the organization of maritime trade?

° What do these wrecks reveal about the nature of Roman maritime trade and the economy?

Numerous wrecks will be mentioned, but the cargoes of 16 are discussed in greater detail in order to elucidate the multifarious processes of Roman maritime trade.

Two fundamental models have been proposed for maritime trade: tramping (often referred to as “cabotage” in English)¹ and directed trade through emporia.² Note that this is not a question of whether ships sailed along the coast or out of sight of land,³ but rather a question of the scale of trade, the level of forethought and planning which went into the composition of the cargo, and the degree of information available with regard to markets. While most scholars argue that directed trade between major emporia was responsible for the vast movement of goods throughout the Roman world, both within and beyond the Mediterranean Sea, some continue to argue for the primacy of tramping.⁴

For N. Morley, the overarching question as to the nature of Roman trade is

... not therefore whether there was significant trade and exchange under the Roman empire, but how far distribution under the empire differed in volume and nature from the constant “Brownian motion” [i.e., irregular or random motion] of *cabotage* and periodic rural markets that had long characterized the Mediterranean region.⁵

In other words, are the significant quantities of imported products found across the empire due to a plethora of random exchanges, or can we demonstrate a level of planning and

1 Cabotage is used in English and French scholarship with very different implications. In the former, cabotage is used to refer to tramping: P. Horden and N. Purcell, *The corrupting sea: a study of Mediterranean history* (Oxford 2000) 137-43; N. Morley, *Trade in classical antiquity* (Cambridge 2007a). In the latter, it means sailing along the coast, or cape to cape. In modern English usage it is also linked with aviation.

2 See primarily X. Nieto, “Le commerce de cabotage et de redistribution,” in P. Pomey (ed.), *La navigation dans l'Antiquité* (Aix-en-Provence 1997) 46-59; and A. Wilson, K. Schörlé and C. Rice, “Mediterranean connectivity and Roman ports,” in S. J. Keay (ed.) *Rome, Portus and the Mediterranean* (Brit. School at Rome Arch. Monog. 21, 2012) 367-91.

3 Cf. P. Arnaud, “Ancient sailing-routes and trade patterns,” in D. Robinson and A. Wilson (edd.), *Maritime archaeology and ancient trade in the Mediterranean* (Oxford 2011) 62; A. Wilson, “Developments in Mediterranean shipping and maritime trade,” *ibid.* 53.

4 See P. F. Bang, *The Roman bazaar: a comparative study of trade and markets in a tributary empire* (Cambridge 2008) 141; Horden and Purcell (*supra* n.1) 142.

5 N. Morley, “The early Roman empire: distribution,” in W. Scheidel, I. Morris, and R. P. Saller (edd.), *The Cambridge economic history of the Greco-Roman world* (Cambridge 2007) 571-72.