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Imperial Boundaries and Commercial Prosopography: The Case of Bankers in Ptolemaic Egypt

It is often assumed that even well before Actium Roman, and more generally Italian, commercial networks and entrepreneurs spread throughout the Eastern Mediterranean with free access, harassed only by pirates. However, such traders were largely unable to cross the maritime boundary with Ptolemaic Egypt, which had for fiscal reasons persistently restricted the flow of goods and people between itself and the wider Mediterranean. Delos and Rhodes, rather than Alexandria, were employed by Egypt as the customary centers of commercial interchange with foreign, especially Italian, parties, and bear ample witness to the presence of bankers who may be taken as a barometer of overall commercial activity and integration.

In contrast, the onomastic and prosopographic patterns of Egyptian papyri and ostraka, as assembled first by Bogaert (*ZPE* 120 (1998), 165-202), demonstrate that the great majority of Ptolemaic bankers (*trapezetai* or *kollybistai*) operated concerns as part of, or on behalf of, the royal treasury. Among those few that did manage their own private banking operations, no Romans can be identified securely as competitors, even after the royal monopoly on banking was withdrawn at the end of the 3rd C. B.C. Although there is very little extant documentation from the Delta and Alexandria, where a greater concentration of Romans might reasonably be expected, the royal monopoly alone renders their presence unlikely until c. 200. After which the remaining fiscal barriers and domination of some Egyptian banking families would have continued to frustrate the entry of Roman competitors. In particular, two very fragmentary 3rd C. B.C. documents in which Roman bankers are sometimes thought to be attested (*SB* X 10226 from Lykopolis; *BGU* 1305 (*PP* 1140) from Syene) are unreliable due to both the general context as well as the ambiguous nature of these putative bankers' names.

In short, the Mediterranean was as much a means of transport and communication for some as an effective boundary by which Ptolemaic Egypt controlled access between itself and the other Mediterranean states, elevating Delos to become the main center of Italian-Egyptian commerce in the era before Actium. One important result was to separate the two financial communities from one another, preventing the kind of integration evident elsewhere in the Mediterranean. Even under the Principate, Roman bankers were largely excluded from Egypt as the new administration adopted much of the structure and outlook of the old regime, in effect creating a new kind of imperial boundary.