

Ticius lawless? Evaluating legal commercial practices through archaeological and textual evidence

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Commercial epigraphy reflects, in my view, the cultural and legal diversity that governs trade and thus provides an insight into the relationship between official state-sponsored law and the unofficial systems employed by traders. This is how law became visible, through the progressive extension of commercial procedures and the materials associated with them, which established and extended its value in many areas. That said, inscriptions written on commodities (e.g. amphorae) indicate the procedures in which the packaged goods were involved from the moment of purchase until their arrival at their destination. As legal artefacts, they reflect a connection with Roman law, but they could travel throughout the Mediterranean and, in that sense, their existence or absence also reflects the different legal cultures present in the Roman Mediterranean. In the commercial world of the Romans, many practices become intelligible when commercial actors began to appreciate their usefulness, the values behind a practice, its limitations and the meanings attributed to it by different groups.

The different schemes used in Roman commercial epigraphy suggest a commercial language, which has favoured connections between different cultures and consists in the material expression of the procedures used in commerce. The study of these inscriptions, together with other types of evidence (e.g. iconography, archaeological data) have allowed me to reconstruct a model of the cycle of commercial practices that takes place from a port of departure until the arrival to a destination, which provides a focus to understand how exchanges took place in the various ports of the Mediterranean. In this presentation, I would like to use that model to study how business inscriptions reveal the different ways in which business procedures have been performed. In turn, these procedures reveal the traits of what trade actors wanted to achieve in a transaction and their legal and cultural backgrounds. This type of approach will help us to better assess the degree of commercial integration across the Roman Mediterranean, to highlight the current gap between theory and practice, and to consider the hybrid character of Roman law in the provinces, where existing legal practices have influenced the law of 'Empire in different ways.