

Flexible interfaces of the Hellenistic world
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The Hellenistic world was not a world without frictions, where transaction costs would have miraculously absent. But the existence of a common language and cultural background, of striking similarities in the border crossing procedures, of a common currency for international trade as well as on the whole low customs duties allowed men, goods and ideas to circulate with on an unprecedented scale and with unprecedented speed in the Mediterranean basin and beyond.

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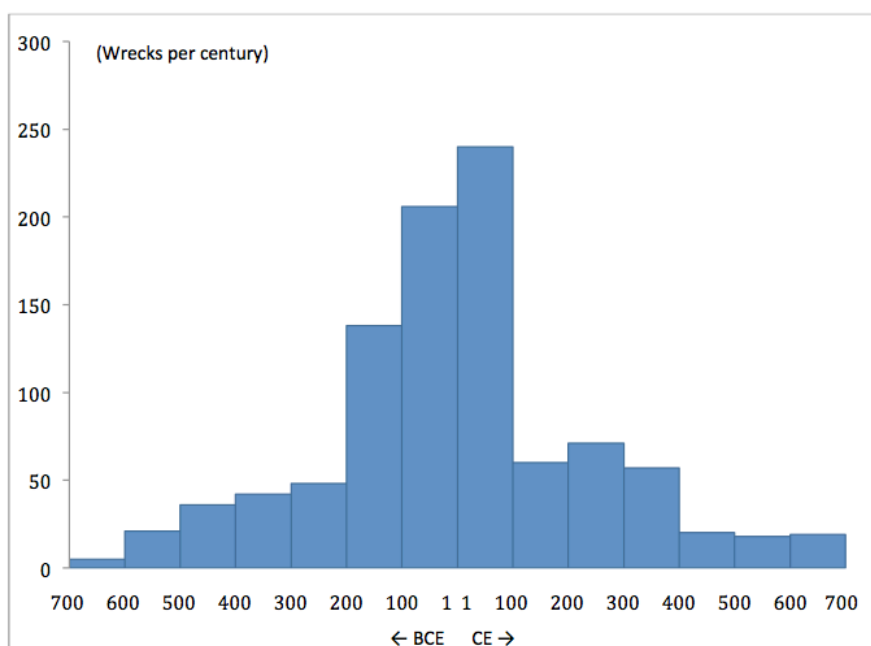
The Hellenistic world was politically very fragmented. In the Classical period, there existed already a multitude of cities, Greek or non-Greek. Their number increased significantly in the Hellenistic period from less than one thousand to more than one thousand and three hundred. But besides in the Classical period the Persian Empire had managed to provide a form of unity to a huge zone extending from Asia Minor and Egypt to India. The conquest of Alexander might have given birth to a new Greek empire covering the same areas. But unity did not last after the early death of the conqueror in 323 BCE. Soon in place of a united empire emerged a series of kingdoms. From the early 270s BCE onwards the main ones were those of the Seleukids in Asia (from Asia Minor to India), of the Ptolemies in Egypt and of the Antigonids in Macedon. But a series of minor kingdoms should be added to the list. In Asia Minor, this was the case of the kingdoms of Pergamon (initially of small dimension but which after 188 BCE was in control of the whole western part of Asia Minor), Bithynia, Pontos, Cappadocia and Armenia. In Iran and Central Asia, the third century saw the creation of the kingdoms of Parthia (ruled by a non-Greek dynasty) and of Bactria, which itself gave birth to a series of new Greek kingdoms in India. Including into this list the kingdom of Bosporos, one reaches around 200 BCE a total of eleven kingdoms, not including in this list the half-barbarian kingdoms or principalities of inland Thrace. The creation of a small number of federal states (Aetolia and Achaia in Mainland Greece, Lycia in Asia Minor) brought only a relative simplification, all the more so than within these federal states the cities continued to exist.

In the west, by contrast, the rise of Rome resulted over time into a process of unification first of Italy (a process completed at the beginning of the third century), then of the whole western Mediterranean basin. The process of unification was famously marked among others by the destruction of the Carthaginian empire in 202 BCE, and then of Carthage itself in 146 BCE. The increasing political fragmentation of the East and unification of the West, with the progressive dominion established by Rome over the whole Mediterranean in the second and first centuries BCE, are thus the decisive characteristics of this period.

Thus it is no exaggeration to say that the Hellenistic world, traditionally defined as covering mainly the Eastern part of the Mediterranean basin and the regions of Asia extending from Asia

Minor to northern India (including some extensions like the Greek cities of the western Mediterranean), was politically highly fragmented. Such a political fragmentation might have translated itself into a cultural and economic fragmentation. But this is not what we observe in this period. Despite the political fragmentation, there existed a deep cultural unity: artistic patterns, fashions, inventions and all forms of cultural constructs circulated surprisingly easily from one end to the other of the Hellenistic world—literally, from Marseilles to central Asia or India or from Panticapeion to southern Egypt. The epigraphic habit from the kingdom of Bactria, in central Asia, does not differ from that of Marseilles. The schools of sculpture of Athens or Rhodes directly influenced the local schools existing all over the Hellenistic world. Inventions like that of the water mill spread all over the Mediterranean, in the case of the water mill from Alexandria to Syria or Marseilles and southern Gaul in general.

The movement of ideas and cultural patterns supposes also a movement of men and of goods. And in fact the Hellenistic world saw a growing intensification of trade relations, which can be measured by the growth of the number of shipwrecks that can be observed in this period. At a time when amphoras were still the unique means of transport of liquid goods, the increase in the number of shipwrecks provides the most appropriate means of measuring the intensification of trade and commercial traffics in the Mediterranean area. There is thus a real paradox. While political fragmentation was at its peak as compared to the previous period (Classical times) and to the following period (that of the unification provided by the Roman empire), the period saw also an increase of commercial relations. This supposes that, per se, the plethora of political frontiers was not an obstacle to the circulation of men and goods.



Mediterranean shipwrecks datable within hundred-year ranges, graphed according to an equal probability of sinking in any year during the date range for each wreck.

Source: Wilson 2011: 35, figure 2.4.

How was this possible? The solution to this question relies in the similarity, simplicity and low cost of the border crossing procedures across the various states of the Hellenistic world.

1. The common cultural interface

The similarity is first based on the existence broadly speaking of both a common cultural heritage and of a common language, *koinē* Greek. This represented a sharp difference with the situation that had prevailed before the Hellenistic period. The pre-Hellenistic Eastern Mediterranean was a linguistic patchwork. The paradox of the Achaemenid Empire was that the language of the Persians themselves (“Old Persian”) had never been even the administrative language of the empire. It was spoken only in Iran and by the small Iranian communities scattered in the various provinces of the empire, and there is no proof that it was actually written beyond the Achaemenid court. Aramaic was the administrative language of the empire (although it never achieved an official status). It was commonly spoken in the Levant or in the small Aramaic-speaking diasporic communities (like in Egypt). Elsewhere, it was used only by the administrative circles and had no deep cultural impact. Local languages prevailed in all provinces, the main ones being Persian and other Iranian languages, Elamite, Accadian, Aramaic, Egyptian, Anatolian languages like Carian, Lykian or Phrygian, and Greek of course which had begun its expansion in Asia Minor even before the conquest of Alexander.

With the military conquest of the Greco-Macedonians, began a process that saw the Greek language becoming universally the language of communication of the elites, and thus also of trade. Most of the time the local languages did not disappear. If they did, like in western Asia Minor, it was a phenomenon that took centuries to become effective. Most of the regions of the Hellenistic world were actually bilingual. The disappearance of local languages as the language of power does not mean at all that they were wiped out as a language of local communication. In Asia Minor, which had experienced a strong linguistic diversity, the elites and the people themselves more or less rapidly switched to Greek. The local languages were still spoken, but became sorts of *patois* that were not used beyond the circle of the family or village. In Egypt, the mass of the population in the countryside (probably around 95 %) still spoke its native language. Demotic was still massively used for written documents like contracts, but quantitatively Greek was dominant. As for the ruling elite, of Greek origin with some adjunctions of local Egyptians, of course it kept its Greek language. In Syria, local elites themselves massively switched to Greek, which does not mean that they forgot their native languages, and of course the mass of the populations kept their native languages, which were also written in parallel to Greek. In Mesopotamia, and above all Iran, central Asia, and northern India, Greek was the language of the small ruling elite, Greek and local elites assimilated to Greeks, but the masses kept their languages. Thus the linguistic situations could be diverse. But the crucial point is that Greek was the language of communication, the language of power, and of course the language of the daily life for the elites and for many urban populations.

With the language and in a large part through the language came also the habits of the Greek

culture. Greek habits in terms of iconography and visual representations in general, became the common patrimony of the various peoples, which expressed their traditional cultures in a form that was “Hellenic.” Beyond the purely formal aspect, this meant also that the local traditions were also reinterpreted by reference to those of the Greek world. In terms of religion, this meant for instance that a Syrian god Melqart reinterpreted as a Greek Heracles could thus “communicate” with the Iranian Bahram. The many fictional genealogies created between cities, Greek and non-Greek, also allowed to create networks that all together created the cultural community of the Hellenistic world. Even the non-Greek Parthian kings made use of Greek for the legends of their coins, where they also defined themselves as “philhellenes.” Despite the particular nature of the kingdom, its very existence did not mean the Eastern Greek kingdoms of Bactria and (later) of India were severed from the Greek homeland. Greek cities continued to exist within the frontiers of the Parthian empire and the trading orientation of the kingdom could only comfort the role of Parthia as an intermediary between Greek central Asia and the Mediterranean.

The existence of a broadly defined common cultural and linguistic heritage should not be underestimated. It is in fact fundamental to make sense of the establishment of common relations between partners which otherwise would have been of different cultural backgrounds. Using the same common language and sharing the same cultural values, at least for a specific type of communication (for politics and for business) was a decisive factor to lower transaction costs.

If we compare with the previous periods and in the same regions, we observe for instance that in order to communicate with local authorities or local people visitors had to resort to interpreters. The fact is well attested for the famous real or fictional character of Wenamun, who in the eleventh century BCE left Egypt to obtain cedar from Lebanon for the temple of Amun at Thebes. On his way back to Egypt and while stopping over in Cyprus, he is nearly lynched by a mob but was saved when a local man who spoke Egyptian could intercede in his favor. Later, in the seventh century BCE, the Egyptian king Psammetichos I (26th dynasty) created a caste of interpreters, who apparently had a crucial role in translating from Egyptian to Greek and vice versa. Following the conquest of Egypt by Cambyses in 525 BCE, this caste of interpreters was inherited from the Egyptian kings by the new Persian rulers. Their existence is attested both by Herodotus and by an epigraphic testimony of the end of the fifth century relating to Naucratis, the main port for Egyptian trade in Egypt before the foundation of Alexandria. The contrast is sharp with the Hellenistic period. In Marseilles, Athens, Alexandria, Antioch in Syria, Seleukeia on the Tigris and beyond, Greek had become the lingua franca and the common language of long distance traders and port authorities. It was also the common language of port authorities everywhere. At the end of the second century BCE, it is also in Greek that Sophytos, the son of Naratos (two names of Indian origin) expressed himself in the region of Kandahar (Alexandria in Arachosia) to celebrate in his epigram his own business achievements (Mairs 2008, 32).

In itself, the existence of this shared linguistic and cultural heritage is a phenomenon that is not self-evident. Why is it for instance that in Asia Minor no local power tried to build a state on

the basis of a distinct and indigenous linguistic and cultural identity? The military and apparently cultural superiority of the Greeks is of course a factor that should not be neglected. But if we observe that the conversion to “Hellenism” began well before the Macedonian conquest, there are obviously factors that cannot be reduced to a pure military or political superiority. In each regional situation a detailed explanation would be required. A good case is provided by Caria, where as early as the fourth century the local indigenous dynasts, the Hecatomnids, created under the shape of a Persian satrapy a local principality where Greek was the official language and where Greek habits were systematically encouraged. For the Hecatomnids probably, it seemed that in order to establish their political power over Caria, and then also of neighboring Lycia regions of Caria and Lycia, Greek would be a far more efficient tool than Carian. They must have considered that Greek would allow both to integrate the Greek cities of the coast and the indigenous regions of the coastal regions, where Greek obviously had already penetrated, into a common political unit. They must also have considered that the official adoption of the Greek language would allow their principality to become a new player in the Aegean or Mediterranean game. In other words, the factors that beyond the pure military or political aspects can contribute to explain why the Greek became the unique language of communication of the Hellenistic world were already in place well before the conquest of Alexander. This explains why the kingdoms of Pontus or Cappadocia, although in the hands of “non-Greek” dynasties, nevertheless adopted completely both the Greek language and the language of Hellenism.

In this respect, the exceptions to the rule validate the model of a common linguistic and cultural heritage as a primary factor for facilitating transactions and lowering transaction costs. The difference between the Eastern and the Western Mediterranean is striking. While East of Sicily the Greek language was universally adopted, this was not the case in the West where the resistance to Greek was backed by the creation of a large territorial state that kept its own language, and then imposed it on all the peoples of Italy, and finally on all those of the Western Mediterranean world. Rome may have had all the appearances of a Greek city. But it jealously kept its own language. This finally created a large cultural divide between the Latin West and the Greek East. Of course, this does not mean at all that communication stopped between the two portions of the Mediterranean, or that there was a kind of linguistic barrier between East and West. Besides, if it did not adopt the Greek language Rome did adopt the whole cultural heritage of the Eastern Mediterranean, in a continuous process that in fact had begun in the Early Iron Age. This means that the creation of a large unified state in the west was also based on the existence of a distinct language of communication that, along with other factors, helped the Romans to shape their own political identity in a form that was very different from the one that prevailed in the East. In turn, the existence of this new political area allowed them to monopolize the resources of this world to their own benefit, if they wished to. This is very clear for instance with the grain of Sicily, which the Romans kept for themselves as soon as they got control of the island during the First Punic War. In the course of time the creation of the Roman dominion also produced a reorientation of trade destinations towards the west.

Another special case, in the East this time, is provided by the creation of the Hasmonean

kingdom after 140 BCE. While in Egypt the local revolts failed to re-create a new stable independent Egyptian state, in Judea the anti-Hellenic movement was successful. There the religious separatism led to the creation of an autonomous state. The creation of the new entity represents an original trajectory in the framework of the Hellenistic world. The creation of the new state was linked to the new promotion of Hebrew at least as the language of the state. The systematic destructions of the Greek cities, like Samaria and Marisa-Maresha, as unacceptable centers of Hellenism and stains of pagan pollution on the territory of the new Jewish state, had certainly a strong local impact. The deliberate will to create a purely Jewish community was not without consequence for trade: while Greek amphoras had been omnipresent in Samaria and Marisa before the destruction of the two cities (and of course are disappear afterwards), they are absent from Hasmonean Jerusalem. The religious taboo both on vessels and food of non-Jewish origin translated directly into the trade relations. However, one should not conclude that the new Hasmonean kingdom became a sort of cultural and economic “isolate.” By many aspects, including trade relations, the Hasmonean kingdom, although with strong distinctive characters remained part of the Eastern Mediterranean *koinē*. It was in fact impossible to eliminate the Greek element, which was pervasive all over the Levant. Alexander Jannaeus (king from 103 to 76 BCE) thus bore the highly symbolic Greek name of Alexander in addition to his Jewish name of Yehonatan. On some of his bronze coins, one side has the traditional Seleukid symbol of the anchor and his name in Greek, while the other side has a Jewish symbol and the name Yehonatan in Hebrew.

2. *The border crossing procedures*

In the Hellenistic world, the border crossing procedures present a striking similarity. We are informed on them by a multitude of decrees from the most various regions bestowing privileges of various nature: privileges to access and leave the port; privileges to export and import; tax exemption (most of the time for goods for personal usage rather than for trade but in some cases also for trade); guarantee of surety, inviolability and neutrality; specific privileges like the title of public guest of the city (*proxenos*) or of benefactor (*euergetēs*), or even citizenship (on these privileges, see Bresson 2007).

What is striking is that despite details that inevitably differed, there existed a common legal approach in the various cities of the Hellenistic world. The legal treatment of the foreigners of the Greek cities of the late Classical period had been expanded all over the Hellenistic world. This meant that wherever he arrived a foreigner knew more or less what would be expected from him and thus he could easily comply with the rules that locally prevailed as they only minimally differed from those with which he was already familiar.

But in itself this forest of documents bestowing privileges to foreigners (who could be traders or foreign individuals briefly visiting or residing in the town in question) raises a serious question. If some foreign traders were privileged, what about the others, those who were not, and who nevertheless formed the vast majority of traders? For them, was it difficult to cross a border or access a foreign port? The answer to this question should be twofold.

Indeed, the privileges were meaningful, and this is why they were highly sought after by traders and other foreigners. The decrees bestowing these privileges were not empty, honorific declarations, devoid of practical consequences. One series of these privileges should be here briefly examined: that of surety (*asphaleia*), inviolability and neutrality (rendered in Greek by *asulei kai aspondei*). These were fundamental privileges for traders. They were constantly traveling from one port to the other, borrowing here, selling there. Inevitably, they entered into contract with a series of partners. Inevitably also they were likely to have business conflicts, or even to have suits, as plaintiffs or as defendants, with various persons in various trading cities. This is where benefitting from personal privileges could become crucial. In case of business conflict, a possible defendant could be sure that his current cargo would not be seized on the request of a potential applicant. His business would not be paralyzed prior to a final judgment. Personal privileges of surety provided also the certainty to get a fair trial in case of business conflict.

This means that the unprivileged, rank and file trader had to be very careful. If he knew that in some cities his cargo could be seized following a business conflict he previously had in that city, or with a citizen of that city abroad, or even if he knew that nationals of his own cities were in conflict with people of a given city (as the principal of collective responsibility was still valid), he had better avoid that port. This is what we see explicitly mentioned in a trade loan contract made at Athens c. 340 BCE and reported in the speech *Against Lacritus* (Ps.-Demosthenes 35.13). The borrower was not to call in ports where his cargo could be seized.

Thus the system was not perfect and had its own legal imperfections. It remains that by contrast with the misfortunes of Wenamun at Dor and Byblos and in Cyprus in the eleventh century, the situation of the trader of the Hellenistic world could seem extraordinarily favorable. He operated in a legal environment that on the whole was predictable. Insecurity linked to attacks of pirates or to a context of war was certainly a far more important factor of risk than the daily routine of crossing a border.

3. Trade instruments and customs or transit costs

In order to be able to trade profitably, a trader must be able to resort to a trustworthy monetary instrument. In this respect, the Hellenistic world had inherited from the Classical period both a common monetary unit, the Attic standard based on a drachm weighing 4.33 g, and a common currency unit, the Alexander silver tetradrachm on Attic standard with a theoretical weight of 17.32 g. Huge quantities of Alexanders had been minted in the years following the seizure of the treasures of the Great King by Alexander in 333 and 332 BCE. The Alexander tetradrachms became the standard coins of the Hellenistic world (with Alexanders of Philip gold didrachms, also on the Attic standard, for high value payments). When starting in the second half of the third century the original mass of tetradrachms began to be seriously reduced by the usual process of attrition (linked to losses, conversion into jewels, etc.), cities (of which we may suspect many of those did so at the request of kings) began to strike what modern scholarship defines as “posthumous Alexanders,” to cope with the decreasing quantities of Alexanders in

circulation. When in the course of the second century BCE Alexander was not fashionable any more, other monetary types were introduced, but still as tetradrachms on the Attic standard. In this respect, there is an exceptional continuity of the Hellenistic world, which kept the same currency for more than two hundred years.

Thus from the end of the third century to the beginning of the first century BCE, and again despite the extraordinary political diversity, the Hellenistic world was a period of exceptional monetary stability, in this respect much more than the Roman empire that came after it.

Again this does not mean that everything was perfect in this respect. The existence of a common zone of circulation created inevitably for some states the temptation to act as free riders and to create close currency systems. This was famously the case for no less a city than Rhodes, the commercial hub of the Hellenistic world; for the Ptolemies in Egypt (and everyone wanted to trade with Egypt, which was a major grain producer as well as a provider of several other much desired goods like papyrus, linen or glass); and from the first half of the second century onwards for the Attalid kingdom in western Asia Minor. The creation of closed currency systems, where the drachm had a lower weight, certainly aimed at benefitting from high exchange duties (if one Attic drachm was exchanged for one local drachm). This was a source of high profits for the states. Technical difficulties for obtaining the local currency could in themselves also be a supplementary source of difficulty for the traders (see Bresson forthcoming). In any case, however, the existence of these closed currency systems did not prove to be a stumbling block for the development of trade. Merchants continued to go to Egypt even when the new closed currency system was in place. It meant only that the volume of the trade was less significant than it might have been, not that trade came at a stop.

4. The creation of a common trading community

One of the key features of the Hellenistic world is the extraordinary mobility that characterizes it. Everyone seems to have been on the move. The professional artists, regrouped in regional associations of *technitai* of Dionysos (the god of theater), went from one sanctuary to the other to perform before various audiences. In the same vein, rival medicine schools (Kos, Knidos, Pergamon) attracted students from various horizons. Wealthy tourists and students also visited the famous sanctuaries or prestigious towns of old Greece, first of all Athens (which despite its political and economic degradation at the end of the fourth and in the third century BCE) remained the center of Greek cultural life. This may seem to be a paradox, when it can be observed that the Hellenistic world was almost constantly at war. But the political fragmentation not only in kingdoms, at the upper level, but also in cities at the lower level, meant that mercenaries from all origins as well as fugitives and captives (slaves) were a common feature of this world (Chaniotis 2004). War could be a calamity for those who were its victims. But it was also for many a direct source of revenue. Besides, it was also a decisive creator of bound work force, which was crucial in the form of development that was at the core of the economic system, with the creation of big farms producing high value commodities, oil and wine that would be profitably traded against any possible good (Bresson 2014). This is why

trade, and especially maritime trade, played a crucial role in this world. Profit was based on medium or long-distance transport that would put into contact regions with different productions. The paradox of the Hellenistic Eastern Mediterranean was that it was on the one hand it was a world where war and violence were omnipresent, and on the other where there existed sophisticated forms of agreement to accept traders from the most varied horizons.

The existence of actual communities of traders who were the agents of this mobility of goods (including slaves as a workforce that could be sold on the market) is a fundamental characteristic of this world. In this perspective, the world of merchants, businessmen and sailors was double faced.

On the one hand, there of course existed powerful local solidarities, *i.e.* solidarities based on a common ethnic and civic origin. This point justifies a more detailed analysis. The island of Delos, which after 166 and until 88 or 66 BCE was the hub of the Eastern Mediterranean trade, provides a sort of test case for these ethnic and civic solidarities. The Greeks, who came of very many different cities but shared a common cultural background in terms of language and cults, did not need to develop specific ethnic-based forms of organization, as they found themselves immediately at home at Delos. Greek people coming from the same city, or the same region, necessarily shared special interests, especially in terms of business.

But foreigners with a non-Greek background, even if they bore Greek names and themselves spoke perfectly Greek, needed however specific forms of organization, which in the world of the time took the form of cultic associations. Sharing a common cult was central to create closer bonds between the members of the group. Trade and business are based on trust, and this “brotherhood of faith” (Gabrielsen 2007, 195) was a way to facilitate transactions between the members of the cultic group. At Delos, this was the case for the Romans and Italians (Rauh 1993; Kay 2014, 198 ff.). Being a Latin speaking community (although quickly most of them certainly also spoke Greek), they were justified to create an organization of their own, and all the more so as they represented the new leading power. Thus the so-called “*agora des Italiens*” was one way or other a space where Romans and Italians could find a cultic and cultural environment with which they were familiar. Thus inscriptions in the “*agora des Italiens*” are both in Greek and in Latin. Other communities had their shrines that were also “club-houses.” This was famously for people from the two Phoenician cities of Beiruth and Tyre. The former were regrouped in the association of the Poseidoniastai of Berytos and the latter in that of the Herakleistai of Tyre. The Jewish community, and (separately) the Samaritan community also had their specific places of worship. There was also a shrine of Isis created by people originating from Egypt (McLean 1996 for an overview).

In terms of organization, scholars have so far mostly insisted on the continuity between the Archaic, Classical and the Hellenistic world. And continuity there is. As early as the Archaic period, it is very clear that in the ancient Mediterranean world obtaining a public recognition and thus a protection against arbitrary or discriminatory measures supposed receiving the right to practice one’s cults. This right materialized in the possibility to erect a sanctuary to one’s gods. Trading communities of traders in distant markets and among other cultures thus strived to obtain them. This was true of the Greeks at Naukratis in Egypt or at Gravisca in Etruria as

well as of the Phoenicians at Pyrgi in the sixth century BCE. In the fourth century, we see that the Egyptians obtained a sanctuary of Isis in Piraeus, and the Sidonians a sanctuary of Aphrodite-Astarte. The situation of the Hellenistic period, and even later in Imperial times with the establishments of the Tyrians at Puteoli and Rome in 174 CE, was thus not different from that of the earlier periods (*OGIS* 595; Terpstra 2013, 70–83).

But indeed the Hellenistic times saw two crucial innovations. The first one was that the self-definition of foreigners was not anymore based only on the geographical origin, and thus was not only of political nature, but also of professional nature. As early as 333/2 BCE, it was a community of “merchants from Kition” who was granted by the Athenians the right to erect a sanctuary of Aphrodite-Astarte (*IG II²* 337; Velissaropoulos 1980, 101–102; Gabrielsen 2007, 192; Kloppenborg and Ascough 2011, 26–32).). After 166 BCE in Delos, the Poseidianastai of Berytos define themselves as “merchants, ship-owners and warehousemen.” All the same the Herakleisktai of Tyre define themselves as “merchants and ship-owners” (*IDelos* 1519). In Athens, in 112/11 and 111/10 BCE, two decrees of an association regrouped around the cult of Zeus Xenios (the Zeus of Hospitality) reveal that its members define themselves as “ship-owners and traders” (Kloppenborg and Ascough 2011, 203–206). This is a crucial shift insofar as previously the only admissible definition was of purely political nature.

The other crucial innovation was the new role that traders and ship-owners could play as a group of transnational nature. In Rhodes, which before Delos had been the main hub for trade of the Hellenistic world (it was deeply impacted by the Roman punishment of 166 BCE but nevertheless maintained a first rank trading activity even after that date), there existed associations (*koina*) of foreigners coming from the most varied cities (Maillet 2012). A fascinating case is provided by an Athenian decree of 323/2 BCE (*IG II²* 343+add.p.659; *SEG* 24 103; Schwenk 1985, 84). This is a classical honorific decree granting a Sidonian the titles of public guest (*proxenos*) and benefactor, as well as the right to own land in Athens. It was also, as it was normal, proposed by an Athenian citizen. But the originality of the decree comes from the fact that the decree proposal was based on a report in favor of the Sidonian provided by “the traders and ship-owners.” It would certainly be incorrect to think that “the traders and ship-owners” in Athens constituted a formal association. But between them existed bonds strong enough to make them act collectively. Their action would be defined as that of a lobby. In Delos, at the end of the second century BCE, dedications were made to various Athenian magistrates by “the Athenians residing in the island, the Romans sojourning as strangers, the traders and ship-owners (and the other foreigners sojourning as strangers)” (*ID* 1645, 1647 and 1649). In the 20s BCE (*IG II²* 3493), “the traders”—obviously those operating in Piraeus—honored the market magistrate (agoranom) Pammenes. This means that, beyond their geographic origins and inevitably various interests, there existed between traders and ship-owners operating in the same location links that were flexible but strong enough to allow them to act as group, obviously to defend their own interests. This was the best possible illustration of the new flexibility of the world of trade in the Hellenistic period, which, as observed above, was the linchpin of the economy of the time.

Thus the Hellenistic world was not a world without frictions, where transaction costs would have miraculously absent. But the existence of a common language and cultural background, of striking similarities in the border crossing procedures, of a common currency for international trade as well as on the whole low customs duties allowed men, goods and ideas to circulate with on an unprecedented scale and with an unprecedented speed in the Mediterranean basin and beyond. This flexibility translated into the existence of informal groups of traders and ship-owners, who could lobby the cities to defend their own interests, as a group. Of course this does not mean that geographical or ethnic rivalries between traders had disappeared. But the existence of these informal groups of traders and ship-owners shows that the traditional ethnic and political frontiers could temporarily be abolished. This was per se a significant contribution to the lowering of transaction costs in the Hellenistic world.

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