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# Trade, Traders, and Religion in Gateway-Cities of the Roman East

## Abstract

Long distance merchants occupied socially liminal positions in pre-modern societies, operating across in-groups that were mostly defined by birth. This created a double need for social cohesion within the merchant collective and attachment to host societies. As has been argued in studies based on epigraphic and literary sources, religion was of prime importance in creating the social infrastructure necessary for this. Below, cases from the well-documented cities of Palmyra, Dura Europos, and Berenike are examined, with the aim of applying this insight on archaeological contexts: How are the religious activities of traders and other mobile and socially liminal groups potentially visible in the material record and the urban landscape?

**Keywords:** Palmyra, Berenike, Dura Europos, Roman Near East, trade, merchants, caravans

## 1 Introduction: Merchants and cities

In popular imagination as well as in modern historiography, cities of the Roman Near East are inseparably connected with caravan trade. Certainly this is not without basis in archaeology and historical sources, but weighing of the evidence tends to arrive at the conclusion that long-distance trade was quite marginal to most cities and most people in the Roman period Near East.<sup>1</sup> Our image might have been influenced on one side by the Orientalist tradition of travel in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries Levant, when Europeans observed and engaged with trading networks then in existence,<sup>2</sup> but arguably also by Western scholars of the colonial period searching for historical parallels and justifications for their own presence and control in

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1 Millar 1998.

2 Carruthers 1929; Drijvers and Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1991; Hachicho 1964.

the region, finding this in the trade between Asia and Europe that was so important in their own time.<sup>3</sup>

That said, the Near East *was* a transit zone between the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean in the Roman period. Caravans arrived in, were organised in, and passed through, the region.<sup>4</sup> It made some people and some cities immensely rich and provided income and access to imported commodities for many others. It brought products and people from all over the old world into the region, but it was hardly a major part of most people's everyday life. While animals were the dominant means of transport of every kind of products going between cities or from hinterlands into them, in most cases this had little in common with the long-distance caravan trade. As Fergus Millar concluded in a critical survey some 20 years ago, the caravan city, a term coined by Mikhail Rostovtzeff and originally used by him to describe Palmyra, Jerash, Petra and Dura Europos, is largely a myth, with one exception, Palmyra.<sup>5</sup> Even in Palmyra, long-distance trade is only to a limited degree reflected in archaeology.<sup>6</sup> This stands in contrast to the potential for wealth that the activity represented and to the possibilities that imported goods offered for conspicuous consumption.<sup>7</sup> Arguably this has to do with trade being an activity of low status in most parts of the ancient world.<sup>8</sup> While we know that the potential for profits were high and that even members of the Roman imperial household were involved in the Eastern trade,<sup>9</sup> it was not an activity that would normally be advertised.

Long-distance traders are nevertheless interesting agents in the life of the ancient city, as they occupied liminal positions in that they operated on both sides of groups defined by ethnicity, culture, language and citizenship. Success at this depended on being able to connect to networks both in their home cities and in the places they visited, and also while they were moving between places.<sup>10</sup> Religion was one important way of achieving this. Below, examples are offered of how the religious presence and attachments of merchants and other people on the move might be sought in urban archaeologies of the Roman period. Cases are drawn from the Syrian desert city of Palmyra, the river-town of Dura Europos, and the Egyptian Red Sea port of Berenike.

3 Warmington 1995 [1928]; Charlesworth 1926; Ray 2008.

4 Gawlikowski 1997; Young 2001; Seland 2016a.

5 Millar 1998; Rostovtzeff 1932a.

6 Dentzer 1994; Seland 2016a, 29–30.

7 Seland 2020.

8 Finley 1973.

9 Bowman 2010.

10 Curtin 1984; Aslanian 2011, 1–22; Seland 2016b.

## 2 Gateway cities

A more useful epithet for the cities discussed here than that of the caravan city might be the gateway-city. The term has a long existence independent of academic discourse, but was developed into an analytical model by Andrew Burghard.<sup>11</sup> He studied cities on the edge of the North American Great Plains as well as along Eastern European railway lines, and identified the gateway city as a node giving access to services and resources of two economically distinct hinterland networks, being situated between them. This gateway city is different than the better known central-place model, where cities, as the term implies, are located near the geographical or travel-time centre of the hinterland they serve.<sup>12</sup> The gateway model was transferred to the Roman Near East by Michael Sommer.<sup>13</sup> Encompassing a range of flows between cultural, economic and ecological zones, not only trade, it has greater analytical potential than the model of the caravan city. Although the gateway model was developed some fifty years ago, it remains well adapted to recent conceptions of cities as parts of networks,<sup>14</sup> as the defining trait of the gateway is its facilitation of network access.<sup>15</sup> In the context of the Roman Near East, the networks that gateway cities connected were in part ecological systems such as the desert, agricultural land, and the sea. In part they were political, in mediating between the Roman and Parthian/Sasanian empires and their neighbours. In part they were economic, in connecting networks of exchange. The gateway city model also remains relevant to places like Dura Europos on the Euphrates, situated at the intersection between empires as well as transport systems, but not a place where the operation of caravans was a foundation of urbanism.

### 2.1 Palmyra

Turning to religion, the important role of sanctuaries in organising and facilitating markets and fairs has long been known.<sup>16</sup> The best documented example is arguably Baitokaike (Husn Sulaiman) in the mountains inland of Arados (Tartus).<sup>17</sup> Here the combination of a prominent inscription regulat-

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11 Burghardt 1971.

12 Christaller 1933; Bekker-Nielsen 2020.

13 Sommer 2018.

14 Raja and Sindbæk 2018; Woolf 2020.

15 Knappett 2013, 126, 146.

16 MacMullen 1970.

17 Dignas 2002, 74–84, 157–161; Ahmad 2018.

ing taxation of goods in transit to bimonthly markets at the sanctuary and an exceptionally large *temenos* give every reason to believe that the temple-precinct actually doubled as a marketplace.<sup>18</sup> In our context Baitokaike, although a village (κώμη) by status as well as size, might be said to function as a gateway settlement between the coastal territory of Arados and the plains and steppe of the Syrian hinterland.

Palmyra of course was the gateway city par excellence: On one side it was firmly integrated in Roman political, economic, social, and military networks and was a central place for its local hinterland, on the other hand it opened to the sparsely populated but economically and strategically important Syrian Desert, not unlike the North American Great Plains' towns of Burghardt's original model. Also Palmyra mediated between the Parthian/Sasanian and Roman empires due to her longstanding and successful diaspora settlements in Parthian-controlled Mesopotamia.<sup>19</sup> While there is disagreement about how central long-distance trade actually was to other Near Eastern cities in general, and even to the so-called caravan cities, there is no doubt that trade was important to Palmyra.

John Grout has recently argued the role of temples in facilitating Palmyrene long distance exchange through hosting, networking, and in serving as caravanserais.<sup>20</sup> He argues that also other temples with similarly large *temene* as Baitokaike were likely locations for market activities, and builds cases for, among others, the temple of Bel at Palmyra, Artemis at Gerasa, the sacred precinct at Hatra, the temple of Jupiter at Damascus, as well as the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>21</sup> That said, even if markets and fairs in temples played a role in long-distance trade, the use of temple grounds for commercial activities also, and probably primarily, served local and regional purposes.<sup>22</sup>

Grout however, suggests that sanctuaries were not only important as market places, but also as networking points. This seems to be the case not only with Palmyrene trading activities, but also, e.g., with regard to Jewish, Christian and Brahmanical merchants in the Indian Ocean.<sup>23</sup> By visiting and worshipping at such shrines, merchants would have the opportunity to reconnect with the religious world of their home, as for instance with shrines for Palmyrene deities outside Palmyra, or to connect with other

18 MacMullen 1970; Grout 2016, 182–185; Ahmad 2018, 47–54.

19 Gregoratti 2010; Teixidor 1984; Will 1992; Sartre-Fauriat and Sartre 2008; Sommer 2020.

20 Grout 2016.

21 Grout 2016, 276–277.

22 MacMullen 1970.

23 Seland 2013; Seland 2016a; Seland 2019; Strauch 2012.

cults, local or translocal, for divine protection as well as social and economic networking.<sup>24</sup>

This networking aspect of temples has also recently been addressed by Leonardo Gregoratti in a study of possible temple involvement in the financing of Palmyrene trade.<sup>25</sup> The main evidence for Palmyrene caravan trade is constituted by a group of ca. 35 so-called caravan inscriptions.<sup>26</sup> Most commemorate services or generosity by the Palmyrene elite towards either caravans or Palmyrene merchant communities abroad, in two cases Palmyrene elite members are honoured by groups of merchants for their contribution towards the construction of the temple of Bel. Gregoratti has surveyed the connections between tribal affiliation, religious cult, priestly profession and protection of caravans with regard to the Palmyrene elite members mentioned in these texts, and argues that temples must have played a key role.

For most of the caravan inscriptions in Palmyra their original location in the cityscape is known. The most prominent venue, with eighteen inscriptions, i. e., half of the total corpus, is the Agora.<sup>27</sup> The Agora was an accessible and public space, situated between the *wadi* that also served as a thoroughfare through Palmyra and between the old Hellenistic/early Roman settlement and the new, monumental city of the second and third centuries.<sup>28</sup> Inscriptions in the Agora are bilingual, most with the Greek text first. The terminology is civic, attesting a prominent place of trade in the public life of the city. There are very few references to religion. Five inscriptions from the Grand Colonnade date from the last phase of the city's independent history. This is where Palmyra celebrated its elite and their place in the world of the Roman Near East, also here there is little or no explicit reference to religion.

Four inscriptions in the temple of Bel are perhaps the most significant with regard to the relationship between trade and religion. The temple of Bel was the main sanctuary of Palmyra, as evident in location, size and age. The temple boasted one of the largest *temene* in the Roman world and was situated at the juncture of the main streets of the city.<sup>29</sup> Sondages have revealed signs of an earlier Hellenistic temple as well as of Bronze Age habitation.<sup>30</sup> Two of the inscriptions are among the earliest of the Palmyrene epigraphic corpus, and commemorate dedications by merchants of Seleucia

24 Grout 2016, 264–266, 268–270; Seland 2016a, 79–85.

25 Gregoratti 2020.

26 Yon 2002, 263–264; Gawlikowski 1994.

27 Delplace and Dentzer-Feydy 2003.

28 Hammad 2010; Gawlikowski 2012.

29 Hammad 2010.

30 Al-Maqdissi 2000.

and Babylon in gratitude for donations towards the construction-costs of the temple (*PAT* 0270; 1352 = *IGLS* XVII. 1. 16; 24).<sup>31</sup> Two others commemorate the safe return of caravans from Mesopotamia (*PAT* 0262; 1404 = *IGLS* XVII.1; 25–26). The composition of the epigraphic record is different in the temple from in the Agora and the Main Colonnade.<sup>32</sup> There is more Aramaic language, some inscriptions are from outsiders, including the mentioned Greek merchants of Seleucia and a number of Roman visitors.<sup>33</sup> Tribal affiliations appear more frequently. There are also a few caravan inscriptions found in other temples, including those of Allat and Baal-Shamin, and there are references in the preserved inscriptions to yet others being dedicated in other sanctuaries. The one in the Baal Shamin temple was for instance one of a set of four, the other three never found, but said to have been displayed in the sanctuaries of Bel, Arsu, Atargatis, and the otherwise unknown ‘sacred grove’ (*IGLS* XVII. 1. 150 = *PAT* 197).<sup>34</sup> This goes to show that there was no single caravan god, but that merchants honoured a number of different deities in gratitude for the successful return of their caravans.

Arguably, the subtle differences in language and content of inscriptions across the city causes the urban plan of Palmyra to partly reflect different social networks that the inhabitants related to and operated within. In the Agora, the audience is the city and in the colonnade, it is the empire; the Bel-temple is an arena for celebrating the Palmyrene commonwealth, which included not only the city populations, but also the diaspora and the semi- and fully nomadic populations in the hinterland.<sup>35</sup>

The Palmyrene iconographic record contains a number of representations of deities, chief among them Arsu, shown together with camels. These depictions, particularly found in the hinterland of Palmyra, have been described as ‘caravan gods’, and are taken to be associated with nomadic lifestyle, martial values, and the social space of the *Badya*, i. e., the steppe.<sup>36</sup> While the association with nomadic lifestyle is clear, there is no evidence that suggests that Arsu had stronger connection with caravan trade than other Palmyrene deities. Camels were necessary for caravans, but were also the wealth of the nomads and important military animals, and thus important status markers.<sup>37</sup>

31 Hauser 2007.

32 Cf. As’ad, Yon and Fournet 2001; Yon 2012.

33 Yon 2012, 14–22.

34 Gregoratti 2020, 472–473.

35 Seland 2021.

36 Rostovtzeff 1932b; Ingholt 1936; Weber 1995; Seyrig and Starcky 1949, 236–240; Teixidor 1979, 77–92.

37 Seland 2017; Raja and Seland in press 2021.

A related, but often overlooked category of finds from Palmyra are the tesserae, small, coin sized tokens of burnt clay, most of them with a text, or iconographic representation of a divinity. Thousands of them have been found at the temples of Bel and Arsu. The common opinion is that these were used as entrance tokens for communal meals organised in the sanctuaries, when the meat of sacrificed victims was distributed during festivals.<sup>38</sup> This notion finds support by the fact that a large number of them were found in the drains of the large banqueting hall in the temenos of the temple of Bel.<sup>39</sup>

More than 1,132 different types are known. In the catalogue of Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky, there are 37 entries depicting camels, making this a not uncommon, but also not very popular motif. Most of the camels have riding saddles, some of them visible military gear, some of them are unloaded, and about half of them are dedicated to Arsu. Only three of the camels carry what seems to be loads of merchandise.<sup>40</sup> Significantly two of these bear dedications not to Arsu, but to Bel,<sup>41</sup> the third mentions two personal names, but no deities. A final, albeit indirect association between the temple of Bel and the activity of long-distance trade, might be found in the 2004-discovery of a graffito on one of the columns surrounding the cella of the Bel temple. The graffito appears to depict a loaded *kellek*, the kind of rafts that were used for downriver transport on the Tigris and the Euphrates.<sup>42</sup>

Caravan trade involved partners from the Palmyrene elite, the Palmyrene merchant community, the nomads of the steppe south of Palmyra and of the diaspora. Using the temple of Bel as a venue and the deity as divine patron for the celebration of caravans made sense. While Bel was not specifically a deity for caravan trade, he was a god for all Palmyra, and caravan trade was an activity that concerned and involved all of Palmyra. As Nathaniel Andrade has argued, caravans need to be understood in a civic context.<sup>43</sup> They were commemorated in the agora, they were protected by elite members, they were organised by magistrates, analogous with associations and with other civic affairs, and they also involved and integrated the populations of the city, the desert hinterland, and of the Palmyrene diaspora in the same manner that the Bel-temple did.

Through its role in long-distance trade, Palmyra served as a gateway between the Roman Near East, the Syrian Desert, and the Parthian Empire,

38 Kaizer and Raja 2018.

39 Seyrig, Amy and Will 1975; Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955.

40 Raja and Seland in press 2021, T13–15; Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955, no. 58, 117, 179.

41 Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955, no. 58, 117.

42 Meyer et al. in press 2021.

43 Andrade 2012; Andrade 2013, 200–201; Seland 2014; Seland 2016a, 71–74.

and in a wider sense between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. This role is echoed throughout the cityscape, especially in the form of inscriptions at the agora, in the grand colonnade, and in the different temples. The presence of caravan inscriptions in a number of temples show how embedded commercial activities were in the socio-religious fabric of the city. The religious site that seems to have the strongest connection to long distance trade, however, is the temple of Bel, not because Bel had special responsibility for the protection of caravan trade, but because he was the main deity of Palmyra and because caravan trade was an important Palmyrene activity.

## 2.2 Dura Europos

Staying in present-day Syria, Dura Europos is situated on the Euphrates river. The city is mentioned by the first-century author Isidore of Charax in his *Parthian Stations* as a stopover on the main itinerary through the Parthian empire. As a gateway city, in periods on the border between empires, it connected the Syrian and Mesopotamian deserts with the imperial Parthian and later Roman networks, not unlike the station towns studied by Burghardt for his gateway model.<sup>44</sup>

Dura was home to a sizeable and longstanding Palmyrene community. Many have ascribed an important role to the city as the riverine hub of Palmyrene long-distance trade.<sup>45</sup> However, there is no attested presence of Palmyrene merchants in Dura. The available evidence relates to religion as well as to military men. Ted Kaizer has suggested that the longstanding Palmyrene diaspora in Dura, which spans both the Parthian and most of the Roman period at the site, should be understood in context of regional Palmyrene imperialism, and that a Palmyrene community or even Palmyrene control in a city formally subject to the Arsacid king might not have been a problem considering the network nature of the Arsacid empire.<sup>46</sup>

The population of Dura, however, surely maintained trading ties with neighbouring Palmyra and elsewhere. People lived there with ready money to spend. In the desert environment goods would come in from afar and with caravans. Dura was also a central-place in its own right, with a rich agricultural hinterland on the Middle Euphrates.<sup>47</sup>

While evidence of participation in the long-distance trade between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean that was so important to Palmyra and

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<sup>44</sup> Burghardt 1971.

<sup>45</sup> Dirven 1999; Gregoratti 2020; Teixidor 1984.

<sup>46</sup> Kaizer 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Ruffing 2016.



Berenike is scant in Dura, three religious buildings from the city have direct or indirect connection with mobility. The first is the suburban temple of Bel, situated in the Necropolis outside the walls of Dura. Grout suggests that the extramural location, the size, and the facilities, including a square courtyard and a large cistern, makes it likely that the temple facilitated mobility between Palmyra and Dura, including commerce.<sup>48</sup> It also seems significant that Bel was among the gods worshipped in this sanctuary, if, as argued above, his cult might have had a role in integrating different segments of Palmyrene society.

Also of relevance are the two most famous religious buildings of Dura, the Christian building and the synagogue. These are situated close to the main gate of Dura, not near the civic or military centres. Both religions were based on social networks that went beyond tribal, civic and ethnic identities. In theory, visiting Christians and Jews would be welcome in these sanctuaries, and able to connect with local networks of co-believers,<sup>49</sup> not unlike the manner that the Palmyrenes would in the suburban temple of Bel. In the Indian Ocean region there is evidence that Christian traders formed the core of religious communities and that from the fourth century onwards churches were built in order to accommodate them. Similarly, Jewish merchants visited the local synagogue in order to ask for protection when venturing abroad.<sup>50</sup> This gives these sanctuaries also in Dura a potential role in facilitating long-distance trade that surpasses most of the other sanctuaries of the city.

### 2.3 Berenike

Turning to the Egyptian Red Sea harbour of Berenike, any discussion relies on the longstanding work of the joint Dutch-American and later Polish-American investigations headed by Willemina Wendrich, Steven Sidebotham and Iwona Zych. Like Palmyra, Berenike certainly qualifies as a gateway city as one of the main interfaces between Roman/Mediterranean and Red Sea networks. For people from the Red Sea it would be the port of entry to the Roman Empire, and for Roman subjects heading out it was likely the last port of their familiar world.

On the evidence of the second-century 'Muziris papyrus' (SB XVIII 13167),<sup>51</sup> imported goods were brought under seal from Berenike to Alex-

<sup>48</sup> Grout 2016, 238–242.

<sup>49</sup> Harland 2003.

<sup>50</sup> Seland 2012b.

<sup>51</sup> Rathbone 2020.

andria for taxation, and it is not likely that the sanctuaries of the port city doubled as market-places for long-distance trade. They may nevertheless have served other needs for traders and people on the move. The great temple at the highest point of the city does seem to have had indirect and direct connections with trade. Here the spectacular find of 7.55 kg of pepper was made, which must have been temple property.<sup>52</sup> Inscriptions to Isis, a deity associated with seafaring,<sup>53</sup> were made by officials connected to the taxation of trade in aromatics.<sup>54</sup>

Well-known is the Palmyrene shrine, identified both with its dedication to Palmyrene deities and an inscription by a Palmyrene archer dedicated in 215 CE.<sup>55</sup> We know that Palmyrene ship-owners were active in the Red Sea, and it is very likely that they would also frequent this shrine.<sup>56</sup> There were, however, also Palmyrene soldiers at Berenike, along the desert road to Koptos on the Nile, and in Koptos, so there is no necessary link to long distance trade in this case.

A third site of interest in the context of trade and religion is the Late Roman harbour temple, used from the fourth to the sixth century.<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, the temple is oriented towards the sea and not towards the city. In Antiquity, it was located on a small island in the harbour, which has now silted up. The temple seems not to have been dedicated to a single deity throughout its existence, but to have served a number of different cults. Several finds in the structure indicate mobility. One was a South Arabian or Aksumite stone altar for burning incense.<sup>58</sup> A small bronze figurine has its closest parallels in South Arabia.<sup>59</sup> The shrine also contained a large egg-shaped basalt-rock of South Arabian origin contained in a pit. The excavators suggested that this either represented the *benben* stone of Egyptian creation myths, alternatively a *baetyl*, a stone worshipped as an aniconic representation of the divine in the Semitic area.<sup>60</sup> In its last phase the shrine seems to have been dedicated to Isis,<sup>61</sup> who as mentioned had seafaring as part of her divine portfolio, and Sidebotham suggests that her worship at Berenike at the Red

52 Sidebotham 2014, 615; Sidebotham and Wendrich 2001, 30.

53 Bricault 2020.

54 Hense 2019, 256–257; Ast and Bagnall 2015.

55 Dijkstra and Verhoogt 1999; Sidebotham, Hense and Nouwens 2008, 137–138; Sidebotham 2014, 611–613.

56 Cobb 2020; Schörle 2017.

57 Sidebotham 2014, 602–609; Radowska and Zych 2019.

58 Sidebotham 2014, 603–604; Radowska and Zych 2019, 239–240.

59 Sidebotham 2014, 605; Radowska and Zych 2019, 240–241.

60 Sidebotham 2014, 235–236; Radowska and Zych 2019.

61 Sidebotham 2014, 607–608.

Sea might have parallels to that connected with the symbolic opening of the Mediterranean sailing season.<sup>62</sup>

Berenike also held a fifth-century church, excavated from 1996–2001, containing the only finds of coins from outside the Roman Empire in Berenike, namely Kushan and Aksumite coins.<sup>63</sup> Churches in Late Roman Egypt were directly involved in trade with the Indian Ocean, and Christianity was an important religion among merchants at least from the fourth century onwards.<sup>64</sup> The Aksumite empire was Christian by this time, and it is not unreasonable to assume that commercial or ecclesiastical travellers from Aksum visited the church. Like the temple before, the church would be a place to ask for blessing before a journey or to thank the divinity after successful completion.

Berenike was a gateway between Roman and the Red Sea/Indian Ocean networks. Travelling in the ancient world was not without dangers. For many of the merchants and other people passing through much was at stake, not only in terms of money, but also with respect to life and health. The sanctuaries at Berenike provide small, but significant insights into how ancient travellers sought to mitigate such risks by religious means.

### 3 Conclusion

The study of the relationship between trade and religion is of interest because it helps us appreciate the social role of both activities in the ancient city better. The critical approach to the topic aimed at above has the goal of not only establishing connections, but also understanding how they worked. The triangular relationship between long distance trade, religion and urban space is rarely explicit. The challenge remains that our data represents only what Roland Fletcher describes as archaeological outcomes, that are neither necessarily representative of past social processes, nor of the material manifestations that are available to us.<sup>65</sup> What can nevertheless be said?

Palmyra, Dura Europos and Berenike were different, but they all served as gateways between and within the networks that tied together the ancient world. Thus, they offer opportunity to study how these networks influenced religious life and how religion contributed towards cohesion or lack thereof. In Berenike and Palmyra, long-distance trade manifests itself throughout

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<sup>62</sup> Sidebotham 2014, 606–608.

<sup>63</sup> Sidebotham 2014, 617–619.

<sup>64</sup> Tomber 2007; Seland 2012a; Seland 2012b.

<sup>65</sup> Fletcher 2004; Fletcher 2010.

the cityscapes, including in religious settings. Merchants, caravan leaders, and sea-captains had religious needs. Sanctuaries had economic interests. These are reflected through inscriptions, as evident in both cities and other kinds of finds such as the large amounts of pepper in the temple of Serapis in Berenike. Some sanctuaries show a stronger connection with trade than others. In Berenike this is particularly evident in the harbour temple, which serves as a religious gateway in its own right, combining worship of Roman, Egyptian, and Red Sea deities. In Palmyra, although caravan inscriptions appear in different sanctuaries, the Bel-temple seems to be the most important arena for the religious celebration of caravan trade. The argument for this is on one side functional: caravan trade was an activity that integrated city, hinterland and diaspora populations and the same was the case with the cult of Bel that reflected the same Palmyrene commonwealth. On the other is the evidence of diaspora merchants honouring individuals and contributing towards the construction of the temple. The two tesserae, which are the only ones depicting camels loaded with merchandise, also carry dedications to Bel. In all three cities there were social arenas that were suitable and accessible for traders and other people on the move. In Dura the church and the synagogue, in Berenike the church, represented access points to local social networks that merchants would be able to connect to. In Dura and Palmyra, the Bel-temple had the same potential role, but primarily for members of the Palmyrene community.

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