

# The Business of Demetrius the Arabarch and the Roman Coins from India\*

by FEDERICO DE ROMANIS

Dal contratto di prestito del papiro Muziris emerge che gli arabarchi, appaltatori della riscossione dei dazi sulle merci provenienti dall'Oceano Indiano, fornivano supporto finanziario ai mercanti impegnati nei commerci con l'India meridionale tramite il *paralempetes*, loro agente operativo. L'identificazione del *praevalens manceps* Demetrio menzionato da Plinio il Vecchio con l'arabarcha omonimo citato da Flavio Giuseppe dimostra che gli arabarchi concedevano anche prestiti marittimi ai mercanti che esportavano in Italia merci soggette ai dazi che essi dovevano riscuotere in Alessandria. Poiché, in virtù dei loro servizi fiscali e operazioni finanziarie, gli arabarchi incassavano e quindi ripartivano i ricavi da virtualmente tutte le vendite delle merci importate dall'Oceano Indiano sia ad Alessandria che a Puteoli, essi dovevano anche essere i responsabili della selezione delle monete da esportare in India.

The loan contract partially preserved on the recto side of the Muziris papyrus elucidates the critical role played by the manager (*paralempetes*) of the customs duties collectors (*arabarchs*) in financing and facilitating a commercial enterprise to the South Indian trade centre of Muziris. The *paralempetes* grants a loan to cover the transport costs within Egypt (for both the outward and the return journey), plus other minor expenses such as the loading, unloading, and storage of the goods at Coptos and Alexandria, and guarantees the other contracting party access to a fiscal procedure allowing a delay in the payment of the import customs duties, which will be paid in Alexandria. The agreed terms in the contract reveal a peculiar alliance between tax-payer and tax-collector, resulting from the constraints imposed by the logistics of the South India trade and Roman fiscal policy. The distance of the Nilotic trade centres (Coptos and Alexandria) from the Red Sea harbour (most probably Berenice), combined with the high value of the Erythraic (imported from the Red Sea and Indian Ocean) commodities and the high rate of the import customs duties (25 per cent on the incoming cargo), essentially forced the merchants to ask the tax collectors not only for some fiscal flexibility, but also for financial and probably logistical support.<sup>1</sup>

\* On 28<sup>th</sup> February 2022 the Doctoral Program in Ancient History and Philology of Sapienza, University of Rome, held an international seminar, named 'G. Beloch's Seminar on Ancient History' centered around the so-called Muziris Papyrus and the recent research on it. Nine scholars from all over the world and specializing in various time periods and areas of the Indo-Mediterranean context delivered their papers and participated in the ensuing debate. As organizer of that scholarly event, I asked our participants to submit a paper for publication. For editorial reasons two papers, signed by Federico De Romanis and Tommaso Gnoli, are published in the current issue of this journal, and the rest of them in the next year's issue. I would like to thank the editorial board of East and West for their kind hospitality.

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<sup>1</sup> De Romanis 2020: 308-312.