Sacred Exchange: The Religious Institutions of *Emporia* in the Mediterranean World of the Later Iron Age

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**Introduction**

The Mediterranean Iron Age, while it is difficult to pinpoint its exact boundaries temporarily,\(^1\) has as one of its hallmarks the proliferation of long-distance trade networks. The development of these networks led to the movement of peoples overseas to capitalize upon trade opportunities while at the same time establishing more permanent settlements around the Mediterranean. Overall, the Iron Age, particularly between the eighth and sixth centuries BCE, is seen as a time of major economic accomplishment in terms of the novel economic structures that were created, allowing for a density of intercommunications supported by regular and frequent movement of goods and people.\(^2\) I wish to focus on these novel economic structures in particular in this paper, specifically the institutions that developed out of and in turn spurred such prolific movements. While difficult to reconstruct out of fragmentary evidence, institutions were vital in allowing human beings the means to cooperate with one another and thus to capture the gains made by commercial activities. Correspondingly, an investigation of Iron Age institutions is vital for explaining rising standards of living and population growth across the Mediterranean world at this time.

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1 The term "Iron Age" lacks fixed boundaries—Near Eastern and Greek archaeologists tend to see it as commencing in the twelfth and eleventh centuries BCE, following the collapse of Bronze Age palatial centres and the migration of the so-called Sea Peoples. On the other hand, on Sicily, the Iron Age does not begin until the ninth century, with shifts from chiefdoms to more egalitarian communities, while in North Africa the Iron Age is seen to commence with the founding of Carthage. The end of the Iron Age melds into more strictly delineated periods: the Archaic period in Greece, for example, or the Republican period in Rome (Hodos 2006 3–4).

2 See Morris 2006; 2007; 2009 for discussions on regeneration, demography, economic structures, and economic performance in the Iron Age Mediterranean.
Perhaps one of the most fruitful contexts for analyzing these institutions is the areas highlighted by both archaeological and literary evidence as zones of intense cross-cultural trade and interaction—communities oriented towards the sea, rivers, and other transportation routes which tended to develop culturally heterogeneous populations. Such a settlement is known best as an *emporion* (Latin *emporium*), although how scholars define this term (or whether we should attempt to define it at all) is much disputed.\(^3\) A common and conspicuous feature of these communities in the archaeological record, however, is the proliferation of religious cults whose identities seemed to cut across cultural boundaries and which I argue provided important institutional structures to mediate social and economic transactions between foreigners. While the scholarly literature has certainly not ignored these cults—nor, indeed the fluidity of religious identities in the ancient world—the deeper meanings and functions of such cross-cultural religious identities are often overlooked, with the result that they are most often regarded as only reflecting cross-cultural contact rather than actively facilitating interaction and commercial exchange.\(^4\) Through this paper I thus aim to call attention to the institutional structures of these nascent commercial and urban centres through their early cults, and to consider the role such cults may have played in facilitating trade between foreign communities. I intend to do this first from a more general standpoint by analyzing the concept and function of the *emporion* during the Mediterranean Iron Age, and second, and more specifically, through examining the religious institutions within an *emporion* on the Tiber River in Italy dating to the sixth century BCE, on the site of what would later be known as the Forum Boarium, or cattle market, of Rome. I end with a consideration of how both a theory of institutions and comparative evidence from later periods can help us discern the explanatory power of these cults in terms of the larger processes of urbanization and economic growth in the ancient world.

**The *Emporion* as City in the Ancient World**

For the purposes of this paper and for the larger unifying theme of this volume—that of the ancient city—it is first of all vital to examine how we define a trading community in the ancient world, and how it relates to the concept of the city. There has been some debate among scholars over how to characterize the idea of long-distance trade and how it functioned within and between soci-

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4 E.g. Scheid 2007. Some notable exception to this situation: Rauh 1993 and Malkin 2011.