Apart from commerce carried on at the local level between villages, the redistribution system of the Egyptian economy, in a physical sense, operated by shipping along the Nile and ancillary canals. For this reason, a study of the documents concerned with shipping and trade is essential to a study of the commercial operations of the large institutions, their relationship to one another and whatever private enterprise may have existed apart from these institutions.

On this last point, it should perhaps be kept in mind from the start that because any small scale private enterprise is less likely than the bureaucracies of the large institutions to have left direct documentary evidence on papyrus, we should expect to find a bias towards the official bureaucracies there. On the other hand, evidence on ostraca is likely to be biased towards transactions on a smaller scale.

In general, the main sources on which we have to rely are records kept by temple and state institutions. These may include documents dealing with the transport of grain, ship’s logs recording daily transactions and movements of personnel and goods, accounts of transactions between institutions and other entities, administrative

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correspondence such as reports from officials to their superiors, records of legal proceedings, royal decrees and some few others.

Shipping and the Central Economy

The backbone of Egypt’s economy was its agricultural production, mainly of grain, and particularly of emmer and barley. Documents support the expectation that riverine traffic was intense following the harvest when grain had to be transported from field to granary. The late Ramesside pAmiens denotes a flotilla of twenty-one ships belonging to the great temple of Amun engaged in the transport of grain. The ships involved were of considerable size, two of them carrying cargo of over 900 sacks each, equivalent to almost forty-three tonnes and occupying approximately 65.5 cubic metres of each vessel.

According to the Nauri Decree, the temple of Osiris at Abydos was provided with ships one hundred cubits, or over fifty metres in length. pHarris I records the building of a sacred barge 130 cubits, or almost sixty-eight metres in length. By comparison, the funerary vessel of Khufu found at Giza measures just under forty-four metres. According to pHarris I, Ramesses III donated no less than eighty-two vessels to the temple of Medinet Habu, though most of these were not large transport ships.

The grain carried by the flotilla of pAmiens was collected from various provincial estates, with each ship carrying grain belonging to several separate foundations. Gardiner supposed that the cargo was to be discharged at Thebes en masse, to be distributed from there to the institutions having a claim on it. It is known that temples might

2) Gardiner, JEA 27 (1941), 47.
3) Nauri decree, 24, KRI I, 45-58.
6) pHarris I, 12b, 10ff.
7) Gardiner, JEA 27 (1941), 41.