



Summary :

Customs duties were a sufficient source of income for the Roman state. The most important find helping the study of customs, which often operated in Asia Minor harbours, is an inscription found in Ephesus, known as "lex portorii provinciae Asiae". The inscription is associated mainly with the customs of the province of Asia, although it provides valuable information about other neighbouring areas as well.

Date

Roman period

Geographical Location

Asia Minor

1. Roman Customs in Asia Minor

Customs duties were a sufficient source of income for Rome both in the republican and the imperial period. They burdened mainly merchants who carried their merchandise (goods of all kinds, including slaves) within the entire empire.¹ The citizens had to pay even for fancy goods intended for personal use, such as eunuchs and prostitutes. In case the merchants failed to exactly declare the items they carried, their merchandise was confiscated by the authorities.

The duty varied depending on the province or the imported items, ranging from 2.5 to 25% of the product's value,² with the exception of goods intended for the army or other state needs, which were traded free of charge. In the eastern provinces, the tax system already existing in the Hellenistic period evolved in the Roman years and resulted in tax increases and better organised customs.

In the early imperial years customs areas often comprised a number of provinces. As regards taxation, the provinces of Asia Minor formed the *Quadragesima portuum Asiae*, while the duties imposed on them provided Rome with a very high income.³ The most important find helping the study of customs in Asia Minor is an inscription from [Ephesus](#), known as "lex portorii provinciae Asiae".⁴ This law was published in [Nero](#)'s years, on June 9, 62 AD, while a similar version had been in effect already since 75 BC. The specific inscription includes information mainly about the customs of the [province of Asia](#), although there is useful information about other neighbouring provinces as well.

Research has shown that the province of Asia was an autonomous tax district, as it happened with the other provinces except [Lycia](#). In particular, the [Koinon of Lycia](#) was exempted from taxation thanks to its exceptional position as a "free" koinon, unlike the "free" Asia Minor cities, which were still paying the legal duties to the Roman state. Customs were established either near the borders of the provinces or on the periphery of some cities or ethnè, but never within the provinces.

2. Asia Minor Cities with Customs

The customs officers or their representatives, the so-called "commissaries", were responsible for collecting taxes, while some of the most notable customs offices were based in [Chalcedon](#), Dascylium, Apollonia on Ryndakos, [Cyzicus](#), Priapus, Parion, [Lampsacus](#), Abydus, Dardanus, Sige, Alexandria, Pitane, Elaea, [Cyme](#), Caesarea, [Phocaea](#), [Smyrna](#), [Colophon](#), [Ephesus](#), [Miletus](#), [Halicarnassus](#) and [Perge](#). In these regions there were powerful guard-houses and units of the Roman army mainly aiming at patrolling the customs and facilitating the unobstructed trading of products, which were frequently threatened by armed gangs.

The passing merchants had to declare both orally and in writing to the above authorities the number of items, their weight and their value. The amount usually paid was equal to the 1/40 of the product's value, although there were some exceptions, such as the tax paid for the slaves, which amounted to 5 [denaria](#) per slave or the tax for some fish equal to the 1/20 of their value. The products traded in the name of the Roman people and intended for public, religious or military use were tax-exempted.



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1. *Digesta* 39.4.16.
 2. Quintil., *Declam.* 359; Symmach., *Epist.* 62, 65; *Codex Theod.* 4.61.7.
 3. Cic., *pro Leg. Manil.* 6-7. De Laet, S. J., *Portorium, Étude sur l'organisation douanière chez les Romains, surtout à l'époque du Haut-Empire* (Bruges 1949), pp. 31-44.
 4. See relevant bibliography.
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Glossary :

	denarius
	Roman silver coin equal to two silver attic drachmas