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Caroline A. J. Skeel

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I.

OBJECTS OF TRAVEL.

IN the history of the early Church, as recorded *Rapid diffusion of Christianity in the first century* in the New Testament, there are two features which seem especially worthy of remark: the rapidity with which Christian communities were formed, and the constant intercourse maintained amongst them. ^{A.D.} Within thirty years after the Resurrection of Our Lord the Christian faith had been preached not only in the regions immediately adjoining Palestine, but in Asia Minor and Macedonia, Achaia and Illyricum, and even in Rome itself. The life of St Paul after his conversion is the life of one who for years was a constant traveller by land and sea, who in early manhood preached the Gospel at Damascus, and when old age was approaching looked forward to a journey into Spain. St Peter addresses his First Epistle to the strangers scattered through five provinces of Asia Minor, and in the concluding chapter sends them a message from the church at Babylon. No less do Pagan writers bear witness to the rapid diffusion of Christianity¹. Pliny's correspondence with Trajan² shows that by

¹ Tac. *Ann.* xv. 44.² Plin. *Epp. ad Trai.* 96 (97).

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112 A.D. a province so insignificant as Bithynia contained numerous Christians not only in the cities but also in the villages and country.

*Inter-
course
between
Christian
com-
munities.*

The founders of these widely scattered communities realized the importance of intercommunication. By personal visits, by letters, and by messengers they sought to strengthen the ties which bound them and their converts together into one Church. The result is seen in the kindly feeling which prompted the Christians of Antioch to send help in time of famine to their brethren of Jerusalem, and the Christians of Philippi to supply the necessities of St Paul. Hospitality is one of the duties expressly mentioned by St Paul in the Epistles to Timothy and Titus as incumbent on bishops, while St Peter and the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews enjoin it on all Christians.

This rapid diffusion of a faith which could count at first on little human aid, and this maintenance of intercourse between its adherents, imply that the means of communication in the first century after Christ had reached a high stage of development. It is the object of this essay to investigate the conditions of travel during that period; especially in Asia Minor, where Christianity made some of its earliest, though not most permanent conquests.

Before travelling can become a habit, men must in the first place be supplied with motives strong enough to overcome their shrinking from the unfamiliar; they must also have attained enough mechanical skill to conquer the difficulties put by Nature in the way of locomotion; and lastly they

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

1]

THE IMPERIAL POST

3

must be assured that travel is at least tolerably free from risk. In the first centuries of the Roman Empire these conditions were fulfilled with a completeness never attained before, and never attained afterwards till quite modern times. The Roman Empire extended from the Atlantic to the Euphrates, from the German Ocean to the borders of Ethiopia. It comprised within its boundaries nations differing as widely as possible in race, language, religion, and in political relations to the mistress-city. The problem of welding together this heterogeneous mass tested Roman energy and enterprise. Common subjection to Rome and worship of the emperor suggested the idea of unity; the material bond was found in the network of roads which connected the several provinces with Rome and facilitated the defence of the frontiers.

*Travel for
State purposes.*

The system of provincial government as established by Augustus could not have been carried on a year had not communication with Rome been frequent and rapid. The sending out of proconsuls and legati, of financial agents and officials of various grades, to say nothing of the changes in the disposition of the troops and fleets, all necessitated an elaborate system of communication. Hence the establishment by Augustus of the Imperial Post, which according to Suetonius¹ was intended for the use of the Princes, his servants and messengers, or of those to whom he granted a special permission. Between each of the stations or 'mansiones' there

*The
Imperial
Post.*

¹ Suet. *Aug.* 49.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

were in general about six ‘mutationes’ where relays of horses (*veredi*) were kept, also mules, vehicles and a number of public slaves. These arrangements were strictly reserved for imperial officials or for those who received a special passport called a ‘diploma.’ This consisted of two folding tablets inscribed with the name of the reigning emperor, the name of the person authorized to use the post, and the period for which the permit was available. Thus the younger Pliny feels obliged to inform Trajan that he has given a ‘diploma’ to his own wife, so that she might the more quickly pay a visit of condolence to a relative¹. The emperor replies that he approves, seeing that the grace of the visit would be marred by long delay. From another letter of Trajan’s² we learn that a stock of dated passports was sent by the emperor to each provincial governor, and that none might be used whose dates had expired. The death of an emperor rendered the ‘diplomata’ issued by him invalid, as is shown by a passage in Tacitus³. Coenus, a freedman of Nero’s, spread a report that the Fourteenth Legion had defeated the Vitellians, who really had just gained a victory at Bedriacum: his object was that the ‘diplomata’ of Otho, which were disregarded, might regain their force.

Vehiculatio.

The horses and mules required for the Imperial Post were at first supplied free of charge by the neighbouring communities. This ‘vehiculatio’ was

¹ Plin. *Epp. ad Trai.* 120 and 121.

² *Ibid.* 46 (55).

³ Tac. *Hist.* II. 54.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

I]

MILITARY COMMUNICATION

5

however transferred by Claudius to the *fiscus*, according to an inscription found on the site of Tegea¹ and dating from A.D. 49—50. This states that Claudius had long endeavoured to shift the burden not only from the ‘*coloniae*’ and ‘*municipia*’ of Italy but also from all the provinces and cities; yet he had found much difficulty in so doing. The old state of things revived under Nero², and became especially burdensome under Domitian. One of Nerva’s most popular reforms was to transfer the cost of vehicles, etc. in Italy to the *fiscus*. His act is recorded in one of his first brasses, struck in A.D. 97, which shows two mules feeding, just liberated from their yokes: the legend is *VEHICVLATIO · ITALIAE · REMISSA*³. The provincials, however, were not exempted till the time of Severus Alexander, when the entire expense of the post—then called the *cursus publicus*—fell on the *fiscus*.

Of vital importance for the safety of the Empire was the communication between Rome and the armies on the frontier⁴. Mommsen holds that Augustus established a regular system of ‘legionary centurions’ who served as couriers, commissariat agents and warders. They belonged to the legions stationed in the provinces; when at Rome they were considered to be on detached duty and were called ‘*peregrini*.’ They lived on the Caelian Hill in the *Castra Peregrinorum* under the *Princeps*

¹ Rushforth, No. 82, *C.I.L.* iii. Suppl. 7251.

² *Plut. Galb.* 8.

³ Middleton, *Remains of Ancient Rome*, Vol. II. p. 356.

⁴ Ramsay, *St Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, p. 348.

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[More information](#)

Peregrinorum (Greek *στρατοπεδάρχης*). Naturally in course of time they became detested as government spies. In all probability the centurion who conducted St Paul and other prisoners to Rome belonged to this class.

Under the same head of travel for State purposes must be reckoned the frequent journeys of the emperors themselves. Suetonius says of Augustus¹ that he visited every province except Africa and Sardinia; these he had prepared to visit after the defeat of Sextus Pompeius but he was prevented by severe storms, and afterwards had neither the motive nor the opportunity. The principate of Tiberius was a complete contrast to his predecessor's in this respect: for the first two years he did not set foot outside Rome². Between that time and his retirement to Capreae he never went further than Antium, though he often promised to visit the provinces and armies, and made elaborate preparations almost every year. At various points vehicles and provisions were collected and many vows were offered for his safe return; but in the end he found some excuse for remaining in Rome, and thus earned his nickname of Callippides, the man who ran hither and thither and never advanced a step. Gaius visited Germany and Gaul, besides meditating an invasion of Britain, which his successor Claudius carried out. Nero spent a year in Greece, while all three Flavian emperors took part in campaigns. Imperial caprice often disorganized traffic. Among

¹ Suet. *Aug.* 47.² Suet. *Tib.* 38.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

1] JOURNEYS OF THE EMPERORS 7

other mad freaks of Gaius we are told that when in Gaul he sold off by public auction his sisters' furniture, ornaments and slaves; delighted with the result he sent to Rome for the old court furniture; so large a number of beasts of burden and vehicles was required to transport it to Gaul that the bread supply of the city ran short, and several litigants lost their cases through inability to appear in time¹.

Domitian's journeys seem to have been especially dreaded. In the Panegyric on Trajan² Pliny exclaims:—"Now there is no disturbance over requisitioning vehicles, no haughtiness in receiving entertainment. The same food suffices for the emperor as for his suite. How different was the journeying of the other emperor in days not long past, if indeed that was a journey, not a devastation, when he carried off the goods of his hosts, when everything right and left was brought to rack and ruin, just as if those very barbarians from whom he was fleeing were falling upon the place."

Less often recorded, but still worthy of mention, are the journeys undertaken by the bearers of petitions or complimentary addresses to the emperor or to provincial governors. The Byzantines spent 12,000 sesterces (£96) yearly on the travelling expenses of a legatus bearing to Trajan a formal honorary decree; also 3000 sesterces (£24) on sending an envoy to salute the governor of Moesia. Pliny with the emperor's approval cut down these expenses, doubtless to the delight of the citizens³.

¹ Suet. *Cal.* 39.² Plin. *Pan.* 20.³ Plin. *ad Trai.* 43 (52) and 44 (53).

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[More information](#)

In spite of all the efforts of the government the journey from the East to Rome had its perils; we still have a marble on which the envoys sent from Mehadia on the Danube engraved their thanks to the Divinities of the Waters for having brought them back safe and sound¹. These complimentary decrees formed part of the business transacted at the annual meetings of the provincial concilia or *κονιά*, which must have given rise to a good deal of travelling². Lastly, the 'appeal unto Caesar' allowed to Roman citizens by the Lex Iulia de Appellatione, brought many accused persons to the capital. Besides the famous instance of St Paul, we have a reference to the custom in Pliny's letter to Trajan, which states that orders have been given for those Christians who were Roman citizens to be sent 'ad urbem'³.

Commerce. Next in importance among the motives for travelling comes the hope of gain by trade. Rome in the first century A.D. was the emporium for the Mediterranean, indeed for the whole known world. Both for her necessaries and for her luxuries she depended mainly on foreign imports. The traffic in corn between Rome and the provinces of Gaul, Spain, Sardinia and Sicily, Africa and Egypt, was regularly organized under the Praefectus Annonae. Year by year the convoy from Alexandria was eagerly awaited; a letter of Seneca's describes how when the corn-fleet was sighted with its despatch

¹ Duruy, quoted by Bury, *Student's Roman Empire*, p. 442.

² Hardy, "Provincial Concilia," *Eng. Hist. Rev.* 1890.

³ Plin. *Epp. ad Trai.* 96 (97).

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[More information](#)

1]

TRADING VOYAGES

9

boats (*naves tabellariae*), its escort of war galleys, and its topsails flying, all Puteoli streamed out to the harbour-moles. Among other imports were objects of luxury from the East, such as ivory, cotton, silk, pearls, gums and spices; manufactures, such as paper from Egypt, woollen dyed stuffs from Asia Minor, and the finest wines from Greece and the islands of the Aegean. To these must be added silver from the Spanish mines, wild animals for the sports of the amphitheatre, and marbles for the buildings which in a few decades utterly transformed the capital of the Empire. Rome had become a commercial as well as a military State; her traders were found not only in every province, but in the wild regions of the Marcomanni, in the far East, and even in the Irish Sea¹. Eager pursuit of wealth is to Horace and to Seneca one of the marked features of the age. "A busy trader, you rush off to the farthest Indies, flying from poverty over sea, over crags, over fires²." "Another man," writes Seneca, "through his eagerness as a merchant is led to visit every land and every sea by the hope of gain³." The same author in a well-known denunciation of Roman habits writes as follows: "May the gods and goddesses bring ruin upon those whose luxury transcends the bounds of an Empire already perilously wide. They want to have their ostentatious kitchens supplied with game from the other side of the Phasis, and though Rome has not yet obtained satisfaction from the Parthians, are not ashamed to obtain birds from them: they

¹ Tac. *Agric.* 24; *Ann.* ii. 62. Plin. *H. N.* vi. 101, 173.

² Hor. *Epp.* i. 1. 45, 46.

³ Sen. *De brev. vit.* 2.

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bring together from all regions everything, known or unknown, to tempt their fastidious palate¹.”

*Peace es-
tablished.*

Closely connected with this wide-spread commerce were the peace and order ensured by Augustus and his successors. The last years of the Republic had seen wars with hardly a break, pirates making descents not only on the shores of the Aegean but on Sicily and even on Italy itself, brigands rendering traffic insecure within a few miles of Rome. Augustus by his vigorous administration made the ‘Pax Romana’ a reality, and for more than fifty years after his death peace continued with the exception of frontier wars. Greek though he was, Strabo was impressed as strongly as Horace or Vergil by the safety of life and property, the security for commerce and the advantages to civilization which arose from a centralized administration. “Never,” he says, “have the Romans and their allies enjoyed such peace and prosperity as that conferred on them by Augustus Caesar, and now by his son and successor Tiberius².” Half a century later the elder Pliny speaks in the same strain of the “immensa Romanae pacis maiestas,” and prays for the long continuance of that blessing which has been “little less than a new sun to the human race³.”

*Travelling
for plea-
sure and
health.*

This comparative immunity from danger enabled many other classes besides officials to indulge in travelling. The elder Pliny⁴ remarks that mankind is ever eager to hear new things, and the younger

¹ Sen. *Cons. ad Helv.* 10, translated by A. Stewart.

² Strab. vi. 4. 2.

³ Plin. *H. N.* xxvii. 1.

⁴ Plin. *H. N.* xvii. 66.