

Life in the Roman Empire: Episode 197

Land and Sea Travel

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Many people traveled in the ancient world – either by land or my sea.

Land Travel

- Most people traveled on foot.
- An average day's walk (if you were on a journey) was about 20 miles.
- Very few people would travel by horse or horse and chariot as these were only used for short distances (and only by the wealthy). If one rode a horse, the max distance they would cover in day is 30 miles.
- If people were traveling longer distances, they'd likely have a slave (or perhaps two) carry their baggage. Pack animals (donkeys or mules) were used from time to time to carry gear, etc., but it wasn't the norm.
- Traveling on land was dangerous due to the widespread problem of robbers (even on major road). As Robert Garland puts it: "As a traveler in the countryside, you would have taken your life in your hands, as you would too if you had ventured abroad at night in a big city. As a result, the well-to-do rarely ventured out of doors unaccompanied."¹
- There's a phrase that appears with great regularity on Roman tombstones: *interfectus a latronibus*, "killed by robbers."
- Travel throughout the empire was made considerably easier (although not "easy") by the vast network of paved Roman roads largely built by the legions. It is estimated that Rome constructed 55,000-65,000 miles of paved Roman road throughout the empire.

Sea Travel on the Mediterranean (called by the Romans *mare nostrum* – meaning "our sea")

- Like land travel, sea travel was dangerous due to weather and piracy.
- There was a six-month window where sea travel was relatively safe (from late March to late September).
- Evidenced by marine archaeology, more shipwrecks occurred in the Mediterranean Sea between 100 BC and 300 AD than at any other period in the ancient world, which tells us that a huge amount of trade and travel was happening during the expansion of Rome.
- Piracy had always been an issue in the Roman world, and it wasn't really brought it into check until 67 BC by Pompey the Great.
- Robert Garland quotes Nicholas Purcell as once writing, "The Mediterranean seaways offered a world of opportunity and danger in which legality was tenuous and violence normal."
- If you were traveling by sea as a private individual, most likely you'd have to hang about on the waterfront waiting to get a place on a ship heading for your destination or at least to a stop-off point along the way. You'd have to take your own bedding with you, your own food, and your own pots to cook with.²

¹ Robert Garland, *Trade and Travel in the Mediterranean* (Lecture 2) in *The Great Courses: Greece And Rome* (Transcript Book, 2008), 28.

² *ibid.*

- In the absence of passenger ships, travelers had to request accommodation on merchant ships.

“After three months we set sail on an Alexandrian ship which had wintered at the island, and which had the Twin Brothers [Castor and Pollux] for its figurehead.” [Acts 28:11]

An Economy of Words (one of many examples)

- [Acts 19:1] And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, **Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus.**
 - Just 10 words but 600 miles!

“Honoring the Mileage” – Paul’s Missionary Journeys

1 st Journey Missionary	2 nd Missionary Journey	3 rd Missionary Journey*
650 miles (sailing)	1400 miles (sailing)	1600 miles (sailing)
700 miles (walking)	1450 miles (walking)	1750 miles (walking)
= 1350 miles	= 2850 miles	= 3350 miles

* The distances for Paul’s 3rd Missionary Journey include Paul’s likely trip to Corinth during his stay in Ephesus (see 2 Corinthians 2:1).

Paul’s Journey to Rome was approximately 2,000 miles.

Paul traveled approximately **9,950 miles** by land and sea during his three missionary journeys and voyage to Rome! And this number doesn’t take into consideration his travels following his release from Roman prison after his first trial under Nero.

- Fun Fact: This is equivalent to Paul walking from Nashville to Virginia Beach. Sailing all the way to Egypt. And then hiking all the way to China!

[2 Corinthians 11:21–28] “Whatever anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham’s descendants? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.”

- Paul is writing this from Ephesus during his 3rd Missionary Journey. If he wrote this after his arrival in Rome, he could have added being arrested in Jerusalem, spending two years in prison in Caesarea, and experiencing another shipwreck on his way to Rome (not to mention being bit by a viper on Malta – see Acts 28:1-6)!

Important Question: Why does a man do this?

[Acts 14:21–22] They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. **“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,”** they said.

- Paul understood that following Jesus wasn’t supposed to be safe or easy! For Paul, there were no guarantees. There were no detailed instructions. There was no step-by-step plan. Paul was called to follow Jesus wherever He led him, regardless of the cost.

[2 Timothy 3:10–11] “You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.”

- Timothy was from Lystra and likely witnessed Paul being nearly stoned to death.
- This was Paul’s last letter, and he’s reminding Timothy of his journey and how he was faithful regardless of the outcomes.

Paul had an encounter with the resurrected Christ, and he embraced the grace of God in his life. As a result, he was a laser-focused life on serving Jesus with everything he had, and fulfilling the mission for which he had been called. He didn’t let fear or failure or a lack of details stop him from being faithful. He was more interested in the development of others than in the safety or comforts of himself. He lived with a passion for Jesus because he knew it would all be worth it – especially in the life to come. Could the same be said of our lives as well?

Additional Implications:

Sources

- Robert Garland, *Trade and Travel in the Mediterranean* (Lecture 2) in *The Great Courses: Greece And Rome* (2008).
- Linford Stutzman, *Sailing Acts: Following An Ancient Voice* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2006).
- David J. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 193-210.
- Mark Wilson (2018) *Paul’s Journeys in 3D: The Apostle as Ideal Ancient Traveller*, *Journal of Early Christian History*, 8:2, 16-34, DOI: 10.1080/2222582X.2017.1411204.