Travel in the Ancient World

A. Trip to Philippi
1. In Philippians 2:25-29 Epaphroditus, the pastor in the city of Philippi delivered a gift to the apostle Paul in Rome on behalf of the Philippian churches.
2. **Philippians 2:25-29**, “Also, I myself have concluded it essential to send to all of you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow-soldier as well as your commander and servant to my need since he has been longing for all of you and has been upset because all of you have been informed that he was sick. For indeed he was sick, near death but God the Son had compassion on him and not only him, but also me in order that I might not have adversity upon adversity. Therefore, I have sent him promptly in order that when all of you have seen him again all of you might rejoice and I might be spared the adversity. Therefore, you yourselves welcome him because of the Lord, with unreserved joy and all of you regard one who is of such noble character as this with honor because for the work of Christ he had come close to dying by having voluntarily risked his life in order that he might supplement your aid to me.”
3. Paul was incarcerated in the Praetorian Camp in Rome awaiting his appeal before Caesar.
4. Epaphroditus made this long and difficult journey and it almost cost him his life according to Paul in Philippians 2:27.
5. So in order to get an idea of the difficulty of this trip we must investigate travel in the Roman Empire during the 1st century A.D.
6. Epaphroditus more than likely followed the course taken by imperial couriers carrying dispatches from Rome to the Roman colony of Philippi.
7. The regular course for the couriers carrying dispatches from Rome was along the Apian Way to Brundisium.
8. Then they crossed over the Adriatic Sea to Dyrrachium, which was along the eastern coast of the province of Macedonia, or they went to Aulona, and then they went by the Via Egnatia to Thessalonica and Philippi and its harbor Neapolis.
9. The direct and apparently easy route along the coast to Neapolis was avoided by the Roman road (as the itineraries agreed): the road turned away from the crossing of the Hebrus at Amphipolis (Act 16) inland to Philippi, the great Roman colonia, before seeking the harbor; but there was, doubtless, always a path in local use from Amphipolis direct to Neapolis.
10. Rome to Brundisium along the Apian Way was approximately 360 miles.
11. Brundisium to Dyrrachium or Aulona took 2 days.
12. Dyrrachium or Aulona to Neapolis was approximately 380 miles.
13. Travelers on foot seem to have accomplished about 16 or 20 Roman miles per day.
14. This estimate of 20 was according to the experiences and observations of William Ramsay (Church in the Roman Empire, page 65).
15. It is confirmed by fragmentary itinerary of a journey through the Cilician Gates, dating from the 1st century in which the daily stages vary from 18 to 22 Roman miles and by the principle of Roman law that the number of days’ grace allowed by the praetor to parties at a distance was reckoned at the rate of one day for each 20 miles.
16. The estimate may seem short, but a consideration of the distances, mutations and mansions, on the Bordeaux Pilgrim’s Itinerary would suggest that the average daily stage was even shorter, 16 to 18 Roman miles and this shorter estimate is in accordance with the following unbiased testimony of Sir H. Johnston, in the Nineteenth Century, 1902, pages 728-729) speaking of the rate of travel on foot, suited for the presumably hardy and strong African workmen going to the Transvaal mines, says, ‘It should be laid down as an absolute rule that not more than 15 miles (16 or 17 Roman miles) are to be accomplished in 1 day.’
17. It may therefore by confidently assumed that the ordinary rate for a long journey on foot was about 17 Roman miles per day.

B. Rate of Travel
1. A long journey at such a rate of traveling was sufficiently fatiguing.
2. The couriers, undoubtedly, were soldiers; only to them could such an important service be entrusted; and doubtless picked men alone were employed.
3. The service must have been planned with a view to be consistent with what can judiciously be expected from good soldiers as a permanent duty.
4. It would appear that a courier carried through to its destination the dispatches with which he was entrusted and that these were not passed from hand to hand!
5. Imperial couriers carried their dispatches as a rule from Rome to their destination, waiting for nothing by the way.
6. Couriers and rapid travelers did one stage of the journey before noon, and a 2nd in the evening, each of 5 hours, 25 miles.
7. Practical experience will show that walking 16 miles or driving 25 miles day after day without intermission in the hot season, is quite sufficient for the strength of the ordinary man, and that only men of more than average strength and endurance can stand a long course of riding 50 miles per day.
8. The question might be raised whether during the most temperate months of the year a quicker rate of traveling was required of the post couriers.
9. The evidence at our disposal does not permit a certain reply; but it is most probable that the rate was uniform for the whole year.
10. Every season offers, or may offer, its own special hindrances to rapid travel; and it would be necessary either to have 1 uniform rate, or to estimate the proper rate for each journey separately according to the weather and circumstances which would be absurd.

C. Safety
1. Although the Roman military was able to greatly improve the security of the traveler, as never before in the ancient world there was still a considerable amount of insecurity.
2. The inscriptions often mention guards or travelers slain by robbers.
3. Juvenal speaks of the criminals of the Campanian roads, who when actively pursued in their usual haunts find it the safest course to take refuge in Rome itself (Sat. 3.305f.).
4. The case described in Luke 10:30 was no uncommon one.
5. Paul’s account of the dangers he faced while traveling throughout the Empire are documented in 2 Cor. 11:26.
6. It was especially dangerous in journeys through mountainous districts, where roads were not carefully guarded, that Paul experienced these dangers (cf. Acts 13:14, 51; 14:24; 16:8).
7. But there was sometimes danger on the most frequently traveled roads.
8. Poorer travelers were those who suffered most, as was natural whereas the rich had large trains: important persons were granted an escort in some cases such as Lucian was escorted by 2 soldiers through Cappadocia (Alex. 55).
9. The Roman roads were probably at their best during the 1st century after Augustus had put an end to war and disorder.
10. In turbulent period at the close of Nero’s reign, disorder crept in again and it is doubtful if the Flavian rule ever succeeded in repressing it so completely as Augustus had done.
11. Thus Paul, Epaphroditus, Titus and Timothy traveled in the best and safest period, and yet the roads even there were in some place far from safe (though probably this was only in exceptional parts).

D. Correspondence and Travel
1. Communication by letter had been common from remote antiquity and with the great development of travel and communication in the Roman Imperial period, it might have been expected that communication by letter should have been greatly developed and increased but this was the not the case until advent of Christianity.
2. The 1st century Christians developed the letter into new forms, applied it to new uses, and placed it on a much higher plane than it had ever before stood upon.
3. In their hands communication by letter became one of the most important, if not the most important, of all agencies for consolidating and maintaining the sense of unity among the scattered members of one universal church!
4. The unity of the scattered churches throughout the Roman Empire was kept alive by travel and by correspondence.
5. Since Paul communicated doctrine through his epistles there was thus a great responsibility attached to the messenger delivering the epistle to be read to the different local assemblies throughout the Roman Empire.