

Transport in Thracia

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Abstract: The example of the Roman province of Thracia delivers insight into the functioning of Roman state transport and emphasizes its role and importance for state and populace throughout the Empire. Located in-between the western and eastern half of the Roman Empire, Thracia and its roads served as a bridge between the two. In reviewing the ways in which the state transport system (*vehiculatio / cursus publicus*) functioned, this paper analyses the relations between claims of the state and private interests regarding transportation, by discussing the following topics: 1. Significance of Thracia; 2. Establishment of infrastructure; 3. Organization and misuse of the state transport system; 4. Interrelations of state and private business. On the one hand, the examination of these topics reveals the huge burden the Roman state imposed on the populace and the problems of misuse of the transportation system. On the other hand, however, it reveals how locals could nevertheless capitalise on the system.

Key words: Roman roads, *viae*, transport, *cursus publicus*, *vehiculatio*.

INTRODUCTION

In the Roman Empire, transport and its infrastructure were crucial assets for the state, society and economy. Merchants and those engaged in transport, other businessmen, as well as private individuals who had occasion to travel, heavily relied on it.

The state depended on efficient and reliable means of transportation for the administration of its Empire: communication, the carriage of supplies, as well as the travels of government officials relied on suitable infrastructure. Consequently, road building was intensified from Augustus' reign on.

In addition, the first emperor created a system of state transport (*vehiculatio / cursus publicus*) that built on a Republican model as far as the requisition of the means of transportation and accommodation was concerned. Over time, it was enlarged and established as an institution organised by the cities of the Empire. Our evidence for the imperial period shows a high degree of movement of goods, as well as increased interconnectivity between the micro-regions of the Mediterranean.

After 45 CE, when Thracia was established as a Roman province, the new territory had to be integrated into the communication network of the Empire. Several documents provide information on the topic. The example of Thracia, therefore, may exemplify the functioning of Roman transport and its implications. These are: the measures of the state in building infrastructure, the organization of the state transport system, and the question of the relation between the people's obligations and benefits.

The following discussion of these questions is divided into 4 parts: 1. Significance of Thracia; 2. Establishment of infrastructure; 3. Organization and misuse of the state transport system; 4. Interrelations of state and private business.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

An analysis of the state transport system during the imperial period (1st – 3rd century) is predominantly based on epigraphical sources. They document not only the building of roads and the necessary related infrastructure (such as bridges, tunnels or rest houses), but further illustrate the organization and functioning of the system by stating rules and obligations for users or suppliers of the system. In particular, the misuse of the system and the impact of private business are further documented by disputes and complaints reflected in letters of the populace or government edicts (Kolb 2000). For instance, the only complete petition to an emperor was found in Thracia and this document refers to the transport system. Compared to other provinces, Thracia seems relatively rich in such documents – a fact that may well be due to the province's role as a transport hub and the resulting high traffic density.

1. Significance of Thracia

The establishment of Thracia as a Roman province in 45 CE transformed the greater part of the Thracian territory into an inland province. The *ripa Thraciae* along the Danube to the Black Sea had been assigned to the newly created province of Moesia inferior, where legions and auxiliary units were stationed to protect the northern border of the Empire.

Although Thracia was an inland province, its location was unique, as it functioned as a bridge between Europe and Asia. In the south and east of Thracia, the Balkans ended in the adjacent Aegean Sea, Black Sea and Sea of Marmara.

On land, the oldest link between West and East, the *Via Egnatia*, cut across the south of Thracia. The *poleis* along the coast of the Black Sea were linked by a road running north to south. The main trans-provincial road (coming from Singidunum in Moesia superior) runs diagonally (hence its modern name *Via Diagonalis*) through the province through Naissus, Serdica, Philippopolis towards the *Via Egnatia* (through Hadrianopolis and Perinthos) to the Aegean Sea and Byzantium. It facilitated the connection to the north-western provinces and was of both military and economic significance. Other routes of strategic and commercial nature were added, such as the north-south link from Oescus at the Danubian *limes* over the Haemus to Philippopolis or the west-east connections in the north and south of the Balkan Mountains (Hollenstein 1975; Wendel 2005; Madzharov 2009; Ivanov 2012, 233-236).

The importance of transport and infrastructure in Thracia is highlighted by the region's position in-between the western and eastern half of the Roman Empire. Thracia was a transit-province. As such, the volume of traffic was most likely higher than in other regions of the Empire. This may be reflected in the body of source material from the province, even though we have to allow for the contingency of our tradition. As it happens, important documents crucial to our knowledge of Roman transport survive exclusively from Thracia. They hint at a connection between state measures and the local population's obligations and economic interests. In other words: The construction and maintenance of roads and facilities for travellers, in particular those commissioned by the state, as well as the provision of means of transportation, resulted in a substantial burden falling on the populace.



Fig. 1. Pictures of inscription IGRR I 766 = *IGBulg* III.2 1690, Archaeological Museum Sofia.
Photos by Anne Kolb

As a rule, such burdens are negatively connoted down to the present day. Nevertheless, it appears that this obligation towards the state was accepted and customarily fulfilled; only additional demands by excessive users were objected to. This shows, I would argue, that benefits from the established infrastructure proved advantageous for the population and even compensated for possible drawbacks. Although residents were obliged to support transport facilities, they did not, in general, assess roads and travellers negatively, provided that everything operated as arranged. Pursuing this line of thought further leads then to the following question: What were the relations between claims of the state and private interests?

2. Establishment of infrastructure

For various reasons, the Roman central authority took interest in a transport infrastructure that incorporated roads and roadhouses. Once new territory was secured by military power, administrative development and economic exploitation were facilitated by these infrastructure provisions. For the most part, both objectives went hand in hand, as new territory was intended to return resources as well as taxes (Bartels 2014¹).

¹ Most recently on roads as military supply routes.

Starting with the reign of the emperor Nero, Thracian inscriptions testify to the government constructing and expanding roads that

had in part existed already in pre-provincial times. A milestone found in what is today Ferres in northern Greece (AE 1991, 1407 = *IThrAeg* 453), as well as three well-known building inscriptions of Nero attest to the construction of roads and roadhouses *throughout Thracia* in the years from 59 to 63, i.e. some time after the establishment of the province. Nero had his procurator Titus Iulius Ustus build several inns along different main roads (*viae militares*) in the province (in 61 CE): “[[[Ner]o C[la]ud[iu]s]] / divi Claudi f(ilius) / Germ(anici) Caesaris n(epos) / Ti(beri) Caesaris Aug(usti) / pron(epos) divi Aug(usti) abn(epos) / Caesar Aug(ustus) Germ(anicus) / pontif(ex) max(imus) trib(unicia) pot(estate) / VIII imp(erator) VIII co(n)s(ul) IIII / p(ater) p(atriciae) / **tabernas et praetoria / per vias militares / fieri iussit per / T(itum) Iulium Ustum proc(uratorem) / provinciae Thrac(iae) = Nero ... ordered inns and quarters to be established along the military roads through the intervention of Titus Iulius Ustus, procurator of the province of Thracia**” (CIL III 6123 = 14207³⁴)².

Although the three stelae only attest the new construction of accommodation for travellers on behalf of the state, they imply the building of *viae militares* by Nero too. But it seems possible that their construction had already been instigated earlier after the province had been established under Claudius, although we lack definite epigraphical evidence.

A marble fragment of an inscription may likewise point to such activities of Nero. The fragment was found at modern-day Belozem (district of Plovdiv), later the place of the Roman station Parembolae at the so-called *Via Diagonalis*, which is located approximately 25 km east of Philippopolis (by an ancient distance indication, *It. Burd.* 568,6). Up to now it has usually been identified as another building inscription that might have recorded the building of *tabernae et praetoria* in *Thracia* by Nero, which we just have seen (Ivanov 1973, 211; *IGBulg* V 5691; Christol 1998, 794; Ivanov / von Bülow 2008, 26)³. Unfortunately, only small parts of the emperor's titles survive, which may be restored as follows: [Neroni Clau]dio Divi Clau[di filio Germanici Caesaris nepot]i Ti(beri) Ca[esaris pronepoti ---].

Mainly the dative case of the inscription, but also the relief ornaments of the fragment and anchor hole may hint at an honorary monument for Nero rather than a building inscription⁴. Taking into account the find spot of the inscription, it is possible that what was being honoured was the emperor's care for transport infrastructure. Until further evidence emerges, this must remain conjectural, however.

Such imperial investment in the construction and reconstruction of way stations is only seldom attested. For instance, after Nero, the *stabula* at the station of Viamata had to be restored by Marcus Aurelius at his own expense (AE 1961, 318)⁵. In principle, those responsible for the construction and maintenance of the infrastructure were the cities of the Empire. Yet, the case of Nero's building activities shows that state incentive was needed soon after the establishment of the province of *Thracia*. At that time, *Thracia* was too poorly urbanised to be able to adequately render the necessary services and split the costs accordingly.

It is only from Severan times that we know of two inscriptions that mention the allocation of construction lots to individual villages to build the *Via Egnatia* on the territory of Traianopolis. Both stelae had been erected by the *phylae* of the city which coordinated the construction work.

² This first stone comes from Mihilci, i.e. probably ancient Viamata (*Not. Dign. Or.* 40.48) on the road from Philippopolis to Oescus; see Маджаров 1985, 43 and Madzharov 2009, 210-211. Two more stelae document the same text: AE 1912, 193 from Buchino / Buchin Prohod (on the road from Serdica to Petrohanski Prohod, Montana to the Danube) and Ivanov 1973 = *IGBulg* V 5691 = AE 1999, 1397 from Ihtiman, ancient *mansio Helice* (*It. Ant.* 136.1) on the so called *Via Diagonalis* from Serdica to Philippopolis; cf. Christol 1998, 792-797; Madzharov 2009, 248-249.

³ Although pointing out the dative formula Hollenstein 1975, 27 interprets it as a building inscription. Furthermore, Stein 1920, 7 erroneously postulated a fourth copy of the mentioned stelae (at that time the third) as a result of a corrupt entry in AE 1916, 17. On Parembolae see Wendel 2005, 118.

⁴ See already Пеев 1926, 81, who published the fragment and interpreted the marble block (27 x 60 cm) due to the anchor hole and its relief ornaments, as the pedestal of a big monument, but saw Claudius as the emperor mentioned. He gave the text as follows: DIO DIVI CLAV.../ ...ITICA...; but nobody else has seen the stone fragment since then. This text from Пеев 1926 was repeated by Геров 1961, 239, fn. 6, who pointed out the dative formula, which was later neglected. My requests about the location of the fragment to the Regional Archaeological Museum of Plovdiv and the National Archaeological Museum of Sofia have unfortunately been answered in the negative.

⁵ Archaeological evidence suggests that it was a large building of 792 square meters, consisting of a peristyle surrounded by several rooms – see Маджаров 1985; for imperial and other investment in roadhouses see Kolb 2016.

The inscriptions list the names of the villages and their allotted sections of the road. These varied according to the size of the villages from half a mile to two miles; most of them measured one mile. This kind of organisation, in which urban *phylae* coordinated the building and financing of a *via publica* on the city-level, is, to-date, only attested for Thracia (*IThrAeg* 433; *447; see Pekáry 1989, 491-492; Mottas 1989, 102-104; Kunnert 2012, 296)⁶.

It was under the same governor, Sicinnius Clarus, that new *emporia* were established in Thracia. An edict from 202 CE (**fig. 1**) containing the charter of Pizos (*IGRR* I 766 = *IGBulg* III.2 1690; see Hauken 1998, 2-168; Kolb 2000, 128-129, 185-186; Hauken 2004; Conolly 2010, 167-173), a new community situated in the territory of Augusta Traiana (at the so called *Via Diagonalis*, south-west of modern Chirpan), shows that the main cause for the initiative was neither economic promotion (Mihailov in *IGBulg* III.2 1690, p. 121) nor the relief of tension between town and country (Ivanov / von Bülow 2008, 47). But what is explicitly mentioned in the text is a concern for and the care of state transportation. We are obviously dealing with the interlacing of governmental and private interests. Evidently, several areas lacked the settlements and settlers required to maintain the transport system. At that time, 167 new residents were settled in Pizos and obliged to look after a roadhouse in their *emporion*. To incentivise their resettlement, they were granted various privileges, not least with regards to the provisioning of means of transportation (*IGBulg* III.2 1690, ll. e60-62)⁷.

3. Organization and misuse of the state transport system

For the purpose of communication and transport, Augustus established the state transport system (*vehiculatio*)⁸, which initially consisted of a relay of couriers who took over from each other during journeys over long distances (Suet. *Aug.* 49.3). The system was soon developed into a fully functional transportation service. Means of transport were made available at regular intervals along the major routes. Wagons and animals could be used in turn by those authorized with a *diploma*.

Thanks to an edict of the governor of the province of Galatia dating from the early years of Tiberius' reign, we know of the workings of this transport system (*AE* 1976, 653 = *SEG* 26, 1392; Mitchell 1976; Kolb 2000, 55-64, 71-80). The local population was charged with the provision of resources, for which they were reimbursed based on centrally determined rates. The residents provided wagons, animals and food at stations along the *viae publicae*. In addition, authorized travelers had to be provided with free accommodation.

Misuse as well as burden sharing between the municipalities of the Empire caused problems and disputes. A governor of Thracia in Trajanic times settled a dispute between the cities of Philippi and Thasos about the provision of means of transportation: "*Lucius Venuleius Pataecius, procurator of the Emperor Caesar Vespasianus Augustus, greets the magistrates, council and people of the Thasians. I found in favour of you against the colony (of Philippi), and you have been reimbursed the money owed, and I hereby make you exempt from the obligation to provide transportation except (for the route) through your land.*" (Dunant / Pouilloux 186 = Philippi 711).

On their mainland territory, the Thasians were obliged to perform duties on behalf of the public transport system. On that account they

⁶ On roadbuilding and the cities in general cf. Rathmann 2003, 104-134.

⁷ But they were not exempt from this burden as it is often deducted in scholarship e.g. Boteva 2000, 22; see further on the privileges Meyer-Zwiffelhofer 2002, 142.

⁸ For the term *vehiculatio* see *CIL* III 6075 = *IvEph* 820: *praef(ectus) vehiculatio*; *BMCRE* III 21-22 no. 19. The expression *cursus publicus* is mentioned by our sources only from the late third century CE onward. Yet, it is consistently used by modern scholars for the former period as well, even though *vehiculatio* seems to have been the term used to describe the imperial communication system during the first two centuries CE. On the mechanics of the state transport system see Kolb 2000, 49-226.

came into conflict with the colony of Philippi and went to court to have the dispute settled by the governor. Although the governor's decision does not name specific roads, his definition evidently was explicit. The obligation included state roads on Thasian territory, meaning a section of the *via Egnatia*, for which the municipality was bound to provide transport facilities.

Admittedly, this state transport system was open to abuse – primarily on the part of the travellers. They either called for more means of transport than they were granted by their permit (*diploma*), or refused to pay the fixed compensation or demanded services that were not due to them. This resulted in provincial subjects sending letters of complaint to the emperor (Herrmann 1990; Hauken 1998; Kolb 2000, 76-81; Jones 2011)⁹. Roman rulers apparently reacted by re-enacting the same rules at regular intervals, as is clear from various inscriptions and from the collection of rules regarding the *cursus publicus* in the Theodosian Code (*C. Th.* 8.5; Kolb 2000, 117-122).

The only complete petition to an emperor, which intriguingly has bearing on our subject, stems from Thracia. The village of Skaptopara, situated in the territory of the city of Pautalia, complained to Gordian III in 238 CE about harassment by travellers (*CIL* III 12336 = *IGBulg* IV 2236 = Hauken 1998, 85-97; see Hauken 2004). The petition spells out what the villagers accepted as justified demands by the state and its representatives. Yet, we also learn about the nature of unjustified excesses. The village was famous for its hot springs, which, among others, primarily attracted governors and soldiers. Skaptopara's location in between two military camps most likely added to this. The inhabitants of Skaptopara were willing to provide free accommodation – which the state usually demanded for its travelling representatives – even if visitors were not present on state business. Claims to additional gratuitous services, such as supplies of food, or demands by non-authorised individuals were perceived as harassment and coercion, however. The latter included visitors to a nearby market that was held on 15 days every year. The Skaptoparians therefore complained: “So, since we can no longer sustain these burdens and, as the others, we too really face the risk of abandoning the settlements of our ancestors, for this reason we beg you, invincible Augustus, to order by your sacred rescriptum that everyone shall keep to his proper route, that they shall not leave the other villages and come to us and compel us to offer them provisions at our expense, and that we shall not quarter those who are not entitled to (such service). For the governors have on many occasions ordered that quarters should not be provided for men other than those sent on service by the governors and procurators. If we are oppressed, we shall flee our homes, and the *fiscus* will be embroiled in the greatest loss. If we are shown mercy by your divine foresight and remain in our homes, we will be able to provide both the sacred taxes and the other impositions.” (Hauken 1998, 96, ll. 73-99). We see that the Skaptoparians warned that some home owners had already left and that more could feel compelled to do so if no check was put on these excessive activities. Therefore, besides threatening *anachoresis*, they drew attention to negative consequences for the state treasury.

Two edicts of Hadrian from Thracia and Asia that were found only recently also address the abuse of the system. They illustrate that such harassment was a phenomenon not restricted to the third century CE

⁹ Most recently, Speidel (2015, 48-53) has resumed the discussion about the so called “Hilferufe” by explaining them not as signs of military anarchy, but of an overloaded transport system.

(*IThrAeg* 185 = *SEG* 55, 744 = *AE* 2005, 1348, Maroneia, Thracia 132 CE = Jones 2011; Hauken / Malay 2009 = *SEG* 59, 1365 = *AE* 2009, 1428, Mykale Peninsula, *Asia* 129 CE)¹⁰. In 132 CE, Hadrian heard in Abdera and Maroneia about abuses by Roman officials while he was on his return journey from the East. Travellers were reported to have claimed free transportation and lodging not only on the road from Maroneia to Philippi but also for the passage to Samothrake. Furthermore, they had demanded unpaid accommodation in the city of Maroneia. As Hadrian's edict states, the travellers were not supposed to rest in the inns inside the city, since they were not actually situated on the *via publica*, which was the only authorized route. Instead, they were obliged to use the way stations outside the city, which were the ones intended for use by travellers on official business. Their stay in the city seems to have opened up additional opportunities for abuse, opportunities that needed to be minimised. By stating the general rules, Hadrian tried to prevent further misuse. Likewise, in Asia, he decreed that transport should only be given to travellers with a permit and that fixed prices had to be paid for food for humans and animals alike; only lodging was free, and only on official business; the use of guides – in order to stay on the right way – was forbidden, the sole exception being times of heavy snowfall (Hauken / Malay 2009 = *SEG* 59, 1365 = *AE* 2009, 1428).

4. Interrelations of state and private business

Despite such misuses of the state transport system, roadhouses and the provisioning of transport facilities also provided income opportunities for the population. The aforementioned edict of the Galatian governor shows that at least 10 mules (or 20 donkeys) were needed per station in early imperial times (*AE* 1976, 653 = *SEG* 26, 1392). Later, horses and oxen were added to these requirements. The procedures relating to their usage show that during imperial times the breeding of suitable animals was not yet centrally organized by the state. This may have been the case only later, as Stephen Mitchell (Mitchell 2014) has recently suggested. Animals and chariots were still rented out on fixed rates. Thus, private business interests were inherent to the system. Several farmers and breeders of animals might have profited from reliable earnings, even if they were, arguably, slender.

This integration of private interests into the system can also be traced for the services provided at way stations. New facilities along the imperial roads – such as the ones built by Nero – were only built from scratch where no such buildings existed.

Admittedly, we are not currently able to clearly identify roadhouses that were exclusively used by private individuals. Based on finds alone, they are indistinguishable from state-owned roadhouses; even more so as we – naturally – expect them to have been erected at the very same locations (Kolb 2000, 183, 210-211; Sanna / Zucca 2010; Kolb 2016).

The services to be rendered, i.e. the granting of accommodation, the changing of means of transport, the maintenance and supply of chariots and animals, respectively, as well as the catering of travellers, were the same for every visitor. Visitors on state business were cared for by the personnel of the way station, employed by the municipality, in which the station was located¹¹. Interrelations between private and state interests become obvious when one considers that the operators

¹⁰For the discussion about the “Hilferufe“ see above fn. 17; for sources relating to such abuse from other provinces see Kolb 2000, 117-122.

¹¹E.g. *CIL* III 12336 = *IGBulg* IV 2236 = Hauken 1998, 85-97 (Pizos, Thracia); more in Kolb 2000, 183-190; the obligation of the cities is further documented by *AE* 2000, 1295 (Dion, Macedonia); Kolb 2016, 7.

of the stations probably also ran the inns at these locations. For travellers on official business they were obliged to provide food and fodder, which was, however, not free of charge. In addition, state travellers had to pay for their meals, as is shown by the aforementioned edict of Hadrian from Mykale: “*It shall not be allowed to demand breakfast, dinner, barley or fodder for free nor should anyone give these when called upon*” (Hauken / Malay 2009 = SEG 59, 1365 = AE 2009, 1428).

That this might have entailed the sale of additional services to travellers is evident. Whether station operators or innkeepers made some extra money by renting accommodation reserved for travellers on state business to civilians will remain their secret. Yet, this likely scenario shows that we may imagine further sources of income generated by providing services to functionaries of the state. One result of such private income opportunities was abuse on the part of the local population, which had to provide the necessary services to official travellers. Sometimes they tended to overcharge users of the *vehiculatio* for their duties. We may infer this from Hadrian’s Mykale-edict which states that provisions were to be sold at the price that had been the going rate at the market ten days earlier: ἀγορὰ τιμῆς / ἥτις ἦν πρὸ δέκα ἡμερῶν (SEG 59, 1365 = AE 2009, 1428 l.34-35).

This kind of profiteering may well have been what was on the mind of a pretorian prefect who wrote about the misuse of the system sometime in the third or fourth century¹²: “*Exemplum epistu(lae) [scrip]tae Messalae Rutiliano a praef(ecto) prae[torio]. Ci]rca armatos et circa ceteros comme[antes sat]is provinsum est principalibus consti[tutionib]us, qua certum est te non ignora[re, ut si s]ecumdum ea partibus tuis functus [sis, nequ]e diplomatibus commeantes neque [coloni] vel stabularii iniuriam patientur = Copy of the letters to Messala Rutilianus written by the pretorian prefect. Concerning those bearing arms and other travellers, the imperial constitutions, which you surely know, take ample care of; if you perform your duties accordingly, neither those travelling with a diploma nor the peasants nor the station personnel will suffer any wrong*” (EKM II 432, l. 13-20).

CONCLUSION

In order to provide efficient transportation for its military and administration, the state was interested in its system running smoothly. Misuse, caused by travellers as well as locals and station personnel, was to be prevented. Yet, not only misuse was inherent in the transport system, but also an interrelation between state and private interests. As a consequence, at least some of the locals sought to capitalise on the system.

¹²From Pella, Macedonia stems this dossier (mentioned in SEG 53, 617) with letters by a high-ranking official consisting of the last part of an edict, two letters of officials and beginning of a letter of protest of the city of Pella. For the full text, see now EKM II 432.

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