

A Roman road and the material traces of transhumance in the Mediterranean

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Rome's roads have been considered a quintessential feature of its vast empire since the city-state began expanding in Italy in the 4th c. BCE. Their imposition in the provinces coincided with the arrival of the Roman army and its conquests, and this network grew new corridors with the aim of imperial consolidation. As material culture, Roman roads are recognizable via large paving stones and accessories included to allow for the dissemination of Roman propaganda, such a mile markers, decorative arches, and bridges. The Romans sometimes repaved and integrated well-established tracks in conquered landscapes; other times, they imposed their will on the landscape by cutting through the natural topography.¹ They also used these connections to impel certain movements, by incorporating those who should be part, while also laying paths that would exclude or isolate certain communities. The road was a strong tool of control and hegemony, as well as an agent in spreading economic potency.² These roads, central to connecting Roman towns, also became public spheres for private display, most notable in the vast remains of tombs of all types that lined these arteries and mingled with everyday structures and spaces, ensuring human engagement with them.³ Indeed, along Rome's road network, material culture begot material culture born of complex layering and communications.

Roads have held an important place in the topographical investigations of researchers into Rome's empire from antiquarian times until today.⁴ This volume takes one stretch of the *Via Sebaste*, which crossed through inland Pisidia to the coastal region of Pamphylia, as its object of study, providing a written, geographic, and photographic record of the still visible remains of this road and the standing remains of associated infrastructure. This is a topographic survey in the truest sense, traditional in its focus and methodology.⁵ The descriptions of the archaeological remains are detailed as the authors walk the reader through the region, presenting its complexity and diversity, and advancing key interpretations of structures along this space of transit.

In reading these remains, the team presents proxy evidence for long-distance transhumance in the landscape. This book is not about the practice of transhumance, the long-

¹ Kolb 2019; Purcell 1990.

² Laurence 2011; Witcher 1998.

³ Emmerson 2020.

⁴ Schnapp 1997; Todd 2004; Quilici and Quilici Gigli, 2004.

⁵ Laurence 2012.

distance movement of stock animals from winter to summer pastures, nor does it delve particularly deeply into its economic or social impacts. However, it opens the door for a more expansive discussion of its material signatures. Influenced by the aims of the topographic exercise itself, the narrative is a top-down image of this road's place in this region – largely a product of imperial initiative and influence. The association between the road and transhumance leads to both being construed as imperial products, placing their study in line with the still pervasive argument that transhumance was enabled by overarching political systems.

The contents

This is a site report of a topographic study, and its contents reflect the descriptive nature of its presentation. Part I (5–66) includes a short monographic text of 52 pages and a brief bibliography. The text is divided into sections that start from the reconstruction of the road network, both main and minor roads, and then adds layers of detail with each monument or structure described.⁶ There are 10 maps. Five situate the track of the *Via Sebaste* in the context of Asia Minor, along with the standing remains and 92 Byzantine and 23 Ottoman cisterns. One hundred nine photographs and nine hand-drawn plans depict the road and its standing remains. The rest of the photographs are of cisterns, each one recorded along with its coordinates. The photographs were taken from the 1990s to 2011 as part of two separate fieldwork projects, the Pisidian survey directed by Stephen Mitchell and another survey directed by Dr. L. Vandeput as director of the British Institute at Ankara. The photos are brightly colored and crisp, considering that many were produced before digital cameras were mainstream in archaeology. The employment of balloon photography reminds us of how we managed aerial photography before drones. Such a record is precious, as the authors recount the progressive loss of archaeological remains to Turkey's pronounced population growth from the early 2000s to today (56–57). Many of the cisterns were photographed with landowners and their families, a reminder that these structures are still in use today, as is the Roman road itself.

Images serve as much as, if not more than, the narrative to depict this region. The reader is struck by the quantity of features recorded. Numerous photos of the paved surface at different points in the track, along with views from the road of the surrounding landscape, situate the reader in its midst. Sarcophagi and collapsed stone tombs reconstruct the personal display in this public context, while we consider that such objects are exposed to the elements. Wide shots, as well as detailed ones of the masonry of the standing remains, leave an impression of their extent and degree of preservation. The reader intuits that this was a well-traversed and busy landscape through the monotony of viewing each cistern as an individual feature. The maps of cistern locations are overwhelming to read because of the quantity recorded at a small scale. However, they get an important point across: these cisterns were found in every nook and cranny of this mountainous landscape.

⁶ However, few inscriptions were recovered that refer specifically to the road. This limits the role of texts in reconstructing the chronology of this road and its associated architectural features. The inscriptions are discussed in more detail below.

Charting the road's main features and contributions

The narrative arc of the text provides a brief historical background to the region, after which reconstructing the road's path becomes the focus. Questions arise around the difficulties of dating such long-lived and oft-repaired infrastructure, and more specifically, recognizing the path of the *Via Sebaste* that runs through the Döşeme Boğazı pass. First, it was the notations of a traveler named Freya Stark, who recorded the pavers, sarcophagi, and inscriptions, and then the work of David French, in studying the milestones of this region, that resurrected this track of the road (13). Aerial photography and ground reconnaissance have made clear that an original imposition in the Imperial Roman period was repaved in Late Antiquity, and probably numerous times again in the Byzantine, Seljuk, and Ottoman periods (14).

Standing remains, particularly those of cisterns, play a considerable role in reconstructing the network of not only the *Via Sebaste* but also the branch roads that extend from it. There is a significant degree of detail employed in describing these cisterns and their spatial locations, as well as their association with other material features in the landscape. Dating is largely based on typology, with the barrel-vaulted type associated with Late Roman/Byzantine cisterns, while the sub-surface domed bottle cisterns were of post-Roman date. However, many earlier constructions were restored in later periods, up to today. It is an evocative idea to say that

the location of these cisterns along the ancient roads shows that they were principally designed for the needs of travellers, and above all for their animals: donkeys, mules and horses, pack and draught animals, camels, and migrating flocks which used the Roman road as a transhumance route between summer and winter pastures (21)

but do we know for sure that these cisterns were primarily used for watering animals? For instance, this region is also dedicated to olive production, which would have benefitted from the extra water provided by cisterns in arid summers.⁷ Could their use have been shared by diverse interests in this landscape?

The road in this section followed the opening provided by a defile, attesting to the considerable changes in elevation in this region. There are two concentrated areas of standing remains, one in the "upper site" and the other in the lower defile. The authors move their descriptions of the material culture of this road from a discussion of the monumental, to funerary tombs of private display, to the everyday structures connected to the movement of people and animals along the route. It was unsurprisingly adorned with milestones attesting to imperial euergetism. A statue base with a dedication to Vespasian has been identified and recorded, as were the remains of arches (21–27). The presence of the latter is in line with other arches found in association with minor towns in Pisidia and Pamphylia, and into Cilicia. These remains lack a decorative program, so dating their construction is difficult. The authors generally place them in the 3rd c. CE, based on the comparative data. Tombs, on the other hand, not only provide evidence of human settlement in this region, but also offer, based on their decorative styles, a proxy date for the many standing remains of ruined domestic structures in the region. These tombs are dated largely to the Roman Imperial period, the 2nd and 3rd c. CE in the estimation of the authors, preceding the structures of the lower site, but they are "relatively featureless and there is little to

⁷ Barker et al. 1996; Mattingly 1995, chapter 7.

add to the brief observations made by the earlier travellers. In their current damaged state, they require no extended description" (29). The photos of the sarcophagi present a less dire impression, but I am not knowledgeable about this class of evidence and cannot assess whether the dating proposed by the authors is correct. However, this gives an indication to the reader of what is, in this topographic reconstruction, a highly compartmentalized approach to the evidence, by type and chronology. While the authors acknowledge that later ancient travelers would have viewed the tombs of these earlier centuries, this is not part of their larger argument about the road's continued role as connector through the centuries, and that thread is abandoned (31).

The architectural remains of the lower defile, on the other hand, all date to the Late Antique period (between 300 and 600 CE), although loosely, as the authors acknowledge that much of this chronology comes from a reading of masonry and its materials. The caveat is that none has undergone excavation and the references to ceramic scatters are limited (40).⁸ This is a topographic, not field, survey project. The standing remains are rich and complex, and it is not just the question of dating but also the ability to understand the function of many of these structures fully that limits this topographic approach to data collection in advancing plausible interpretations. This is not to say that any of the authors' proposed identifications for the various structures are incorrect or off base. In fact, given the spatial and historical context, I found their interpretations not only plausible, but also compelling. However, it elicits a certain frustration, as a reader shown the richness and potential of a suite of landscape features, to realize all that we will not, or cannot, know due to the limitations of the topographic methodology. We lack the details of daily activities only recoverable through excavation.

The tombs provide evidence of permanent settlement in this area that is bolstered by the presence of a village, marked by domestic structures, that seems to grow into the 6th c. CE. Our details are sparse for life there, but also sometime in the 6th c. CE, by the investigators' estimation, several small, unpretentiously made churches were woven into this landscape. "The churches served the spiritual needs of travellers, but they also called attention to the efforts and generosity of their anonymous builders" (40). Lacking inscriptions or textual evidence but comparing this region to the nearby town of Sykeon and the story of Saint Theodore, the authors surmise that the Döşeme Boğazi churches were constructed through a similar impulse by wealthy benefactors to promote themselves along well-trafficked routes. This opens questions about who these wealthy individuals were and whether they held landed properties in this zone. The travelers are taken to be pilgrims, but did shepherds also worship in these churches? How did transhumance movements at certain points of the year impact the accessibility to the faithful?⁹

The structure in the lower site, identified as a *mansio*, has been presented in depth in an article for this journal, where arguments for its definition were advanced along with discussion of architectural comparanda.¹⁰ Made up of multiple rooms, a second floor, and courtyard, it could have provided accommodation for travelers, stabling for their animals,

⁸ For instance, in the domestic structures of the lower site.

⁹ For the role of churches on the *Gran Tratturo* in the Abruzzo region of Italy: Somma 2015. Pastoralists and Christian myth were often linked, as in the story of the Archangel Michael appearing to a shepherd on the Monte Gargano in *Apulia* (Arnold 2000).

¹⁰ Mitchell 2020.

and lodgings for support staff. Facing the road, and more than 40m long, this was an imposing space, which provides a sense of the scale of movements along this track of the *Via Sebaste*. Without excavation, the functions of the various rooms and the duration of their use remain ambiguous, as is the presence of animals stabling there.¹¹ Yet, it is here that the authors can best engage topographic interpretation, as a ruling of Constantine in 315 CE established such structures along roads, managed by military staff. The confluence of form, position, possible chronology, and ancient text leads to the inevitable conclusion that this is a *mansio*, and one likely touched in some way by imperial hands. It is common for discussion of these structures to link them to the imperial transport network.¹² A *mansio*, then, could reinforce the imperial mark on the road and the role of imperial patronage in impelling movement. Such typologically conditioned ideas, and the desire to define via the imperial texts, hinders a more comprehensive interpretation of this structure in its broader context.¹³ Opening perspectives to the kinds of engagements that occurred in this space would help to animate the road as a space of myriad connections and interactions.

It is not only the *mansio* that is linked to imperial influence. So, too, the most enigmatic of the structures, found in the lower defile and, as described by the authors, at the confluence of multiple routes: a “trapezoidal, high-walled enclosure, about 80 m², which was built at the south edge of the settlement in the angle between the highway running south-east towards Perge and Attalea, and the road that ran a little west of south towards Termessus” (41). It is not only the structure’s form and size, but also the features of its high walls that give it its unique character. The authors note that the northern wall is preserved to 10 m in height but is only 80–90 cm thick and supported by two features: the first were buttresses, spaced at 2.5-m intervals, and the second is evidence for a timber construction, that “would have formed an external skeleton around the thin walls” (43). This served as a reinforcement support as well as a potential insurance policy during earthquakes in the region, sustaining the wall. Near the northern entranceway, roofed shelters were found and, in the interior, the remains of cisterns. Although previous travelers and scholars have advanced hypothetical interpretations for this structure ranging from a monastery building to a storehouse for agricultural produce, the authors settle on an enclosure for animals. They build their argument by comparing this structure to others in Asia Minor and the Middle East.

The structure provided a large, bounded space not only to gather animals and contain them, but also to furnish necessary shade. Depending on the time of day, this shade would not have been total or even abundant. But anyone who has seen a flock nestling even under the low remains of walls on an excavation knows that sheep and goats do not need much to find some relief from the Mediterranean’s battering sun. It is here more than elsewhere in the narrative that the reader comprehends the confluence of the space of the road, the natural topography, and the specific activities related to transhumance. We cannot know who built this structure, even if in its form and scale it would have required a significant amount of coordination of both labor and materials. Due to its distance from the major

¹¹ For a collection of recent case studies from Italy of excavated *stationes* and *mansiones*, see the edited volume of Basso and Zanini 2016.

¹² Di Paola 2016 for an alternative picture to that dominated by the *cursus publicus*.

¹³ For scholarship working to expand our understanding of these structures in their local contexts: Bowes et al. 2011; Zanini and Giorgi 2017.

towns in this area – between 15 and 30 km, and too far to serve any one town specifically or easily – the authors argue that it was the Late Roman state who financed the project. It would have served as a convenient location to collect taxes levied for passage along this route. However, little is reported on the characteristics of flock holdings in this area. Did the emperor own flocks?¹⁴ Were these flocks connected to the Roman army?¹⁵ What do we know about private holdings, of both land and animals, that might have financed or contributed to this construction? Could we envision flock owners who were private citizens willing to invest in this infrastructure?

It is telling that this work puts such weight on the structures assigned to this road and its role in transit and movement. The presentation of the village 2 km northwest and up-road of the *mansio* is mainly descriptive, with no generalized interpretation. It is more difficult to read life in this space from masses of collapsed stones and delicate standing remains. These spaces, then, become secondary to the broader interpretative project, just as the domestic structures of the village of the lower zone did. Still, these descriptions make apparent the greater complexity and diversity of spaces organized in this landscape over time.

Contributions to a history of transhumance, inspiring new directions

Transhumant pastoralism has been identified in many regions and climatic zones in the Mediterranean, foundational and often constitutive of lifeways starting in the Neolithic period and continuing to the present day. The Neapolitan Dogana delle Pecore and the Spanish Mesta were powerhouses that fueled the economic might of the late medieval to early modern kingdoms, one pillar of Braudel's Mediterranean *longue-durée* history.¹⁶ Horden and Purcell also underscore the importance of transhumance in their model of connectivity, as a practice encouraged and bolstered by the micro-regional diversity of the Mediterranean.¹⁷ In both narratives, the environmental setting provides the potential for a practice built *a priori* on diverse topography and the cyclicity of the seasons. In fact, what stands out in these two seminal narratives, as well, is the certain timeless character of transhumance: it was a practice that renewed itself regardless of political or historical circumstances, crossing periodizations and outliving empires. Historians of the Roman world are stauncher in their arguments that truly long-range transhumance, involving flocks first owned by the Roman elite and then the emperor himself, would not have been possible without the *pax romana* and imperial economic conditions.¹⁸

Mitchell, Wagner, and Williams are clear that transhumance practices in southern Anatolia had a specific chronology, namely, the Late Antique centuries of a resurgent eastern Mediterranean economy, bolstered by the consolidation of the empire at Constantinople. While there is some question as to the secure dating of the material remains, their general attribution to the Late Antique centuries provides a snapshot of the scale and management of this practice at that time. It offers an important

¹⁴ Corbier 1983.

¹⁵ *Codex Theodosianus* 7.7.3.

¹⁶ Braudel 1972; Marino 1988; Phillips and Phillips 1997.

¹⁷ Horden and Purcell 2000.

¹⁸ Corbier 1983; Gabba and Pasquinucci 1979; Volpe 1996.

counterweight to those narratives that tend to flatten the impact of these practices over large swaths of time on Mediterranean landscapes.

However, I would have appreciated more framing for the lead up to these Late Antique centuries. Would transhumance have been practiced in earlier centuries in this landscape? Might the movement of people and animals have helped to carve out first the path that the Romans would then consolidate, pave, and monumentalize with their growing control and interest in the region? It seems difficult to sustain that the practice appeared as a novelty in these later centuries given the characteristics of this zone. That it was maintained for centuries after the end of Rome and then the Byzantine empire, into the Seljuk and Ottoman periods, is a testament to the resilience of certain practices across political changes in the region. For instance, more attention could have been paid to interpreting better where later Ottoman cisterns were constructed and why, as well as the choices of their form. This narrative, over time, can accommodate the complexity of both continuity and change, with a greater engagement with how this layered material culture contributed (via rigorous contextualization) not only to supporting logistics, but also to broader social engagements in the region. However, the topographic aims of this work are not focused on a broader social, economic, or political history. The potential to push this data further is clear.

It has been 35 years since Graeme Barker made the case for an archaeology of the pastoralist, to “see” these individuals in the landscape, as bolstered by data from his field-survey investigations of the Biferno Valley in Italy.¹⁹ To his mind, unless we could situate these practices in space and in time, we would not be able to understand them. Later investigations in the Crau region of southern France resurrected sites inhabited by pastoral communities archaeologically, demonstrating their material signature despite their mobility.²⁰ This archaeological work has also been important in calling into question ancient narratives like that of Varro (*De re rustica*), in which shepherd society was painted as marginal to the Roman world; these were shepherds who carried with them imported finewares, among other objects, after all.

Mitchell, Wagner, and Williams’s study has therefore added a significant case to the broader conversation on the material culture of transhumance. Its focus is different, underscoring material culture related to the mobility of the practice itself and the needs of the herds: the road, the significant stopping points while in transit (the *mansio* and the animal enclosure), and the cisterns. The sites where travelers stopped to rest along with their animals were spaces, as interpreted by the authors, made by the state to facilitate this practice, just as the road itself would have done.²¹

The infrastructure of transhumance therefore takes primary place, rather than the community of shepherds themselves, or for that matter, the communities they were moving through. Indeed, the authors insist that the *Via Sebaste* was not a local road but was rather made to link to the larger trans-continental road network and was the most important means of transit between Pamphylia and Pisidia (51). We might know little about the

¹⁹ Barker 1989.

²⁰ Badan et al. 1995.

²¹ Another line of archaeological investigation looks to the remains of animals themselves to understand whether seasonal patterns are revealed: Buglione et. al. 2015, through an assessment of age, size, and sex, and most recently, Trentacoste et al. 2023, adding evidence from isotope analyses of animal bones.

villages both in the valley and in the uplands due to the quality of preservation of their remains, but they also play little part in this story. This practice is therefore contextualized as almost external to the local places that sustained it, to lay emphasis on imperial interests.

For this top-down imposition, it was imperative that transhumance could reasonably “fit” into this space, without being in competition with either olive growing or cereal cultivation. The authors conclude that passing flocks would have been advantageous to this landscape by manuring the fields – the oft-cited strategy for agricultural and pastoral symbiosis in the Roman empire’s rural places (30).²² Frequent cisterns would have ensured that animals remained well-watered on their journey, implying that there was no competition for resources. In many ways, this text demonstrates transhumance could have been maintained, and at scale, in this landscape, by running parallel to other concerns. But the *Saepinum* transhumance inscription, as well as others from southern Italy, remind us that things could have gotten messy with day-to-day interactions.²³ Even with the best intentions of an animal enclosure in this case, there was always the mobile trajectory of flocks spilling into and out of this space. This is not to say that there were conflicts, or at least not exclusively, but rather that there were multiple points of connection and integration among myriad actors in this landscape: farmers, shepherds, pilgrims, local elites, tax collectors, and the list goes on. There must be some acknowledgment, too, of the possibility that this road was not just a highway, but also a local means of connection and circulation, appreciating the movements of localized, short-range pastoralism and daily and/or intermittent mobility.²⁴

The remains of the *Via Sebaste* are diverse, extensive, and numerous, providing a compelling picture of how transhumance could contribute to shaping the appearance of a landscape in a Mediterranean world where such examples are myriad and unique. It could also, with further questions asked of the data, get us closer to understanding the pastoralists who were the motor of this practice, as well as the impacts of their connections and mobility, both economically and socially.

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²² As recorded in the ancient sources, Varro, *Rust.* I.xix.3.

²³ Corbier 1983. For studies linking pastoralists to brigandage, at least in the Roman imaginary: Giardina 1986/1997; Volpe 2010.

²⁴ See Corbier 2016 calling for further study of local pastoral practices; Grey and Arnoldus 2020 for Roman peasant mobility.

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