

Cursus Publicus: Transportation in Ancient Rome

F. K. De Vos

EVER since that great revival of interest in Antiquity, the Renaissance, put the study of the ancient Mediterranean world high up on our Western curriculums, younger generations have absorbed—more or less willingly and with more or less lasting effect—the fact that enlightened rulers used to improve mail, road and sea transport systems. In times of civil strife or poor leadership on the other hand, students were and still are told today, communications deteriorated, the capital city remained without contact with the distant provinces, piracy and highway robbery thrived and chaos threatened to engulf both the body politic and economic.

In this connection much is made, naturally, of the Roman *Cursus Publicus*, the first organized system of mail the world has ever had. And rightly so, for in a world where rumour often constituted the only news and messengers went on foot through beast and brigand infested country to reach their destination, or never be heard from again as chance would have it, this institution founded by the first emperor, Augustus, undoubtedly filled a great need.

But, beneficial though this *Cursus Publicus* was in its beginnings and however badly the Roman Empire may have needed a reliable system of Mediterranean-wide “special delivery” to carry instructions, light freight or money at shortest notice, its increasing abuse by corrupt officials

with discretionary powers and its confiscatory setup gradually making it into an unbearable burden to every city, village or home situated within its network would almost seem to call for a complete reversal of judgment. While the *Cursus Publicus* was conceived as a great plan and initially served a useful purpose, its rapid corruption has been such as could well justify the argument that it actually evolved into a *public curse*. In other words, the desirable end did not warrant the altogether iniquitous means used to attain it. And the means were all the more unjustified since they finally were to lead to exactly opposite results.

TO understand the full significance of Augustus' introduction of the *Cursus Publicus* in Rome, it is helpful to examine the general setup, both technical and economic, of transportation as it had developed in the Mediterranean world before the first emperor founded his famous State Mail service.

As in the history of philosophy, Greece also played a disproportionately large part in the history of technical improvement in means of transport. Compelled by the compartment-like division of their valleys, islands and peninsulas, they perforce concentrated their attention on maritime trade and the perfection of seagoing craft. Taking the two existing types of vessel used by other peoples such as the Phoenicians,

the Greeks developed a cargo-boat, which first appeared as a small tubby craft suitable for coasting only, and made it into a powerful ship carrying an enormous spread of canvas and adapted to heavy loads and long voyages while, for escort purposes, they devised first the penteconter carrying a sharp ram (at the end of the Homeric period) and towards the end of the eighth century the Corinthians added the redoubtable trireme. Capable of holding up to 200 men, this beautiful man o'war was made safe in the course of the seventh century when another Greek invented the anchor.

Meanwhile shore equipment and men kept pace with progress afloat. Polycrates of Samos had boathouses built whereas Homer's heroes had not known them, being content to draw their shallow craft on the beach at dusk. Piers and docks were improved and harbours built while the *neolkos* looked after docking.

When the straits of Leucas became sanded up, threatening to force Corcyra-bound ships to make a detour and stand out to sea, the Corinthians deepened the fairway. One of them, Periandros, thought of cutting the Isthmus of Corinth, a task which was to prove beyond the art of his contemporary engineers and was left to modern times for realization. But the urge to avoid the storms off Cape Melia and at the same time appreciably shorten the voyage from the Ionian Sea to the Aegean was so strong that, as a second best solution, a timber road (*diolkos*) along which the ships were dragged on rollers was laid across the Isthmus from Lachaion (Corinth's harbour on the Ionean) to Kenchrai, in the Aegean basin.

Carrying capacity of merchantmen also increased from 10 to 15 tons to some huge vessels of up to 360 tons (7,000 bushels) while river boats on the Euphrates and Nile measured between 200 and 300 tons. Speeds too had improved considerably, trebling from Odysseus' two knots to Xenophon's description of a Milesian ship's crossing between Lampsacos and the Laconian coast (290 miles) at an average speed of six knots, at the beginning of the seventh century. After Alexander, light-houses became quite numerous.

Though less spectacular, progress on land also constituted a tribute to the untiring inventiveness of a people that gave every opportunity to individual initiative.

To facilitate the passage of cartwheels on their roads, Greeks put artificial rails in the ancient ruts, a practice which they may actually have learnt from neolithic Malta, while Etruscan roads were paved at least in the cities, a custom later imitated by Rome. But greater progress was to be made in improving the tractive power of draft animals. Some time in the fourth century an enterprising muleteer invented the hipposandal, a type of crude shoe of metal, leather or hide which went a long way towards protecting the animal's feet against the disastrous effects of hard, dry roads. Still not the ideal solution, these hipposandals often got lost when needed most.

With the invention of the horseshoe which became generally known in the Western Mediterranean countries during the third century, still greater progress was made in making "horsepower" more efficient. Indeed, no more fundamental improvements were added until the invention of an improved yoke—in the thirteenth century, some 1600 years later—which allowed the animal to pull its load without putting pressure on its carotid arteries, thus allowing it to work much more effectively.

IN this ever-evolving background of inventions, progress, trial and error, and private initiative protected and furthered by rather democratic governments whose functions were circumscribed, Rome was to super-impose an organized system of state mail and—whether by co-incidence or not—development of transportation throughout the Rome-dominated Mediterranean world was to come to a standstill as from the very time of this initiative.

In setting up his postal and transport system — *Cursus Publicus* — Augustus studied the examples of many other systems in Persia, Greece, Egypt and early Rome itself. Main influence was no doubt exercised by the Egyptian *liturgical* (unpaid, feudal) system while every once and again during its later course reforms were

attempted along the Persian *angareion* (state financed) system.

The difference between Persia's *angareion* and Egypt's *liturgia* was due to the inherent differences between the two countries. In a rugged land of desert highlands separating few fertile valleys and peopled with poor, proud herdsmen, a feudal system in which draft animals, vehicles, food and shelter (or their equivalent in money) were to be contributed locally was obviously unthinkable. In Egypt, millenniums of pharaonic oppression of a relatively prosperous peasant population in the fertile Nile valley made it a natural. At any rate, the Egyptian system made quite an impression on Caesar when he stayed there in 48-47 B.C. and his successor Augustus adopted the Egyptian liturgical principle while combining it with an ancient Roman custom (*evectio* or *legatio libera*) by which members of the Senate were allowed the privilege of requisitioning carts and draft animals even for their own private travel. In the years prior to creation of the *Cursus Publicus* this custom was repeatedly altered. Condemning it as harmful to the people, Cicero restricted the *evectio*'s duration to one year while Caesar extended it again to five years, until Augustus cancelled it altogether as he replaced the *evectio* system with his newly created *Cursus Publicus*.

Basically a copy of the Egyptian feudal system whereby the entire burden was placed on the population dwelling in terminal cities and ports or along the roads, the *Cursus Publicus* soon grew into an almost intolerable impost as more and more roads (*Vias*) were opened up or linked together into an all Roman imperial network. While a detailed account will be given below of its technical, personnel and economic aspects, it may already be said that the *Cursus Publicus* had three major drawbacks for the people living along its encircling web; first, it offered no service whatsoever to those forced to support it; second, draft and riding animals lent to it were very often away from the farm when needed most for agricultural work; third, upon their eventual return these animals were invariably in exhausted condition and

in need of a long resting period with abundant feed.

So apparent was the need for reform even before the *Cursus* had completed its first centenary that Claudius' reign (41-54 A.D.) saw active preparation for its improvement launched despite the Emperor's notorious levity. Four decades later, under Nerva, a coin was struck showing two mules unharnessed behind a cart of the *Cursus Publicus* symbolizing the freeing of draft animals from inordinate commandeering while the inscription reads '*To Italy's remission of vehiculation.*' Italy actually needed lightening of the *Cursus* burden most because it had the densest road network in the Empire. Only a few years later, Emperor Trajanus reserved to himself the right to issue *diplomata* or letters entitling their bearers to the use of *Cursus Publicus* facilities thus giving us the first indication of the kind of abuse this state-run transportation setup had already led to. In this connection there exists an interesting record of a letter written by Plinius to the Emperor and explaining how he had given his wife a *diploma* to travel to her father's deathbed and hoping that the Emperor will pardon him on account of this act of filial duty. It is a typical incident well illustrating how this state-imposed people-supported system was not to be abused under penalty of severe punishment . . . unless one could think of a good excuse or happened to be the right official.

Hadrianus (117-138) too favoured reform but when his reign closed the area of the *Cursus Publicus* was larger than ever before, perhaps due to his famous propensity to travel about the Empire looking for public works. His successor, Antoninus Pius (138-161) went into the by now popular act of promising alleviation from the *Cursus*—something reminiscent of modern promises of lighter taxation—but little is known of his deeds in this respect.

Thirty years later, after the military anarchy had ended with Commodus' and Pertinax's assassinations, Septimius Severus "wanting to ingratiate himself with the people, transferred the burden of ve-

hicularion from the shoulders of the private citizens onto the Treasury." But this drastic reform too was short-lived—if it ever was carried out. Jurist Julius Paulus indeed lists the provision of *Cursus* services as a general duty of which only soldiers and teachers of liberal professions are exempted. No doubt Caracalla (son and successor of Septimius Severus) had felt secure enough to re-introduce the obnoxious *Cursus* as a public rather than a treasury burden.

AT the turn of the fourth century under Diocletian some measure of reform was put through but it turned out to be one of a technical rather than financial nature bringing no relief to the population. As before, fresh riding and draft animals had to be supplied in exchange for exhausted ones, night travellers were a local responsibility while in some instances, mainly on deserted roads, travellers foraged miles away from the highway requisitioning without payment among distant settlements. Two reasons would seem always to have prevented a real transfer of the burden to the treasury: The *Cursus* constituted such a heavy burden that it would have ruined the State's finances and throughout the Empire's history the tendency was constantly for taxes to be paid in kind rather than in money. All Diocletian did was try to remedy some of the worst abuses by personnel reform while in the technical field he initiated the division of the *Cursus Publicus* into a fast (*velox*) and a slower *cursus* (*clabularius*) for freight transport. His successor Constantinus (306-337) decreed certain improvements for this newly created state freight transport service, first of which was ordered in 314.

But the old trouble, abuse of the privilege by all who could bluff their way through, seemed to stick with it. Only two years after Constantinus' death, his successor Constantius bitterly complains about officials who so abused the *Cursus Publicus* that he, the Emperor himself, had had difficulty finding some twenty draft animals on one of his own journeys (339). Towards the end of his reign he put considerable effort into a drive to curb this recurrent misuse although at the same

time he paradoxically widened the group of potential users by allowing an entire new class of people—Christian bishops travelling to and from their synods—to avail themselves of its advantages.

With Julianus some of the most genuine reforms were carried out—this time effectively—although his successor Valentinianus I was to cancel these along with the less well inspired innovations of the famous pagan emperor. Trying to relieve the burden of government generally, Julianus naturally resolved to lighten that imposed by the *Cursus*. He restricted the right to issue travel documents to fewer officials except in certain urgent cases. He deprived all property owners of their exemption from service to the *Cursus*, thus lightening the burden on the pitiful ones who had to share the work and expense—a reform which hit the clergy who had been exempted by Constantius from all obligations in this connection. In 362 he cancelled the fast *cursus* (*velox*) as well as its horse supplying service on the island of Sardinia where little need of it had ever existed anyway; and at the turn of 362-363 he climaxed his reforms by inaugurating a truly fiscal service to be paid for by the Treasury. Writing from Antiochia to his praefectus praetorii Mamerminus who held sway throughout Italy, Illyria and Africa, Julianus ordered him to launch a discal *cursus*. Actually only certain restricted areas around Venice (Istria) ever benefited from this reform which was cancelled within a year of Julianus' death while some of his other reforms took ten years to become undone. It is quite clear that Julian wished to relieve the economic plight of the rural population which was nearing total bankruptcy and that he saw in the regular disruption caused by predatory operations of the *Cursus* one of the worst causes of this rural decline. He was correctly convinced that a transportation system such as the *cursus* should be financed by those benefiting from it (state, officials and state-run manufactures). Running against the general tide, however, he was to prove but a straw in the stream towards totalitarianism and he and his work were soon engulfed. Already in 364, Valen-

tinianus I allows his lieutenants to write travel permits and, in 381, Libanios mentions that those officials entitled to issue such documents are "very numerous" as against the 17 to whom Julianus had restricted the privilege. All that remained of Julianus' reforms was the cancellation of the fast *Cursus* in Sardinia.

Under the following emperors Valentinianus, Valens, Gratianus and Theodosius little change occurred. After the final separation of East and West Rome following Theodosius' death (395) decline of the postal system was rather rapid in the West while the Eastern part continued relatively unchanged. The sacking of Rome by Alaric's Visigoths in 410 could not but further undermine the Western empire's whole administration including the *Cursus Publicus* until upon arrival of the Eastern Goths in Italy nothing but a scant mail and high official travel service remained. In Eastern Rome, emperor Leo had cancelled the *Cursus Clabularius* (freight) in 465 because the turn-over of draft animals particularly for this freight service constituted an intolerable burden on the population. That reform may also have been in line with the then newly prevailing tendency of a return to cash payments of taxes instead of in kind (adaeration). After this, few reliable data are available though the trend was definitely toward disintegration of the whole *Cursus* on account of its many uncontrollable abuses. Under Justinianus it was restricted severely except on the road to Persia where a war had to be fought but on all other roads horses were eliminated and only donkeys remained available. Later still the emperor restricted the *Cursus* to himself and his suite and usurpation became practically impossible. In one form or another the *Cursus Publicus* subsisted in Eastern Rome until the fall of Constantinople (1453).

WHILE no doubt variations did exist between the equipment of one postal and transport station and another throughout the Roman empire, some general characteristics may however be discerned. Thus as a rule horses were reserved for despatch riders, mules were used as draft animals for the fast carriages

while oxen were the normal tractive power for freight transport organized under Diocletianus as *Cursus Clabularius*.

The most common cargo on the different vehicles was comprised of urgently needed war materials, parchment and papyrus, state revenue, express parcels of all kinds and officials and their families. Gold and silver as well as the express parcels usually travelled by the fast *Cursus Velox*. These bullion shipments were carefully regulated and a distinction was even made between those destined for the State Treasury (*metalla ad largitiones sacras*) and those addressed to the Emperor's private treasury (*ad largitiones privatas*). The former were considered to be more urgent and less regard was therefore paid to the cart's capacity while the latter were shipped with less haste and more consideration for the vehicle's resistance. Consequently the limits for these shipments were set at 500 Roman pounds of gold or 1,000 pounds of silver and 300 pounds of gold and 500 pounds of silver respectively (a Roman pound being equivalent to about $\frac{3}{4}$ pound avoirdupois).

Stations were mainly divided into two types, *mansiones* and *mutationes*. The former had lodgings and larger numbers of animals and carriages and at the latter exhausted teams were exchanged for fresh ones during the day's trip. Distances between stations varied between 20 and 30 miles for the stages and 100 to 150 miles for the larger ones which were usually situated in cities. On secondary roads (*canales*) where the *Cursus Publicus* was not organized, travellers carrying necessary authority commandeered similar equipment from the local population. This came to be quite a burden particularly on certain roads with a heavy tourist traffic. Cassiodorus is known to have freed one city of *Cursus* obligations because it was situated on such a popular highway.

Each large station was provided with an average of 40 animals while the smaller stages where animals were baited during the day averaged 20. Each year a quarter of these "public animals" were replaced with younger ones and this operation was referred to as "reparation of the *Cursus Publicus*." All carts, carriages and other

equipment belonged to the State and were repaired at State's expense. They included, for the fast *Cursus* the *raeda*, a four-wheeled 1,000-Roman-pound carrying vehicle, or the *carrus* which was similar but with a capacity of only 600 R. lbs., both of which were drawn by 8 mules in summer and 10 in winter; the *carpentum* which carried passengers only and was drawn by four mules and could be either two or four-wheeled while its capacity was restricted to 214 R. lbs.; and the *birota*, a 200 R. lbs. carrying contraption drawn by three mules. The slow *Cursus Clabularius* used *angariae*, rather crude carts drawn exclusively by oxen.

Although astonishingly little is known about the *Cursus*' organization on water, it is generally admitted that in this field the State usually endeavored to make use of private cargo vessels plying the Mediterranean and the different rivers of the Empire of which many more were navigated than today. Ferries and barge services had to be rendered on the rivers and it is probable that coastal cities were compelled to offer transportation services on a feudal basis exactly as in the case of the *Cursus* on land. And yet, it would seem as if Rome's control of maritime transport had never reached the totalitarian stranglehold that it did succeed in getting on land transport. Inherent differences between the two may hold the explanation for this different evolution—differences which even to this very day seem to be still at work making maritime transport a much less regimented business than, for instance, railway transportation.

The story of feed hay for *Cursus* animals is of some interest too because it again illustrates how corruption crept into the imperial bureaucracy responsible for its administration. Apparently, hay was supplied by the citizenry as part of their feudal duties (*liturgia*) but they were paid for it by the Treasury at a certain stabilized rate, whereas the stables had to be built and maintained by the people with only the manure as a consolation prize. By the year 360 A.D. however, Anatolius (the *praefectus praetorii* of Illyria) ordered that hay would henceforward be supplied at fixed dates to prevent *Cursus* officials

from demanding hay on short notice when it was scarce and then selling it at a higher price than that paid under State rates. Emperor Valentinianus applied this throughout the Empire (365).

Since taxes were often paid or at least shipped at the larger *Cursus* stations, these were equipped with weights (*sexarii*) and measures (*modii*), the latter of copper or earthenware, to ensure adequate control of taxes paid in kind. This part of their equipment should not have contributed to the *Cursus Publicus* already doubtful popularity.

THE responsibility for the *Cursus Publicus* always rested with the Emperor. But while at the beginning under Augustus and his immediate followers this principle was carried out in practice with the Emperor's closest executive (*praefectus praetorii*) in charge of checking on complaints, claims and irregularities, later centuries saw more and more decentralization accompanied by a crumbling of the original sense of responsibility. Also, the vital right to issue letters authorizing the bearer to use the *Cursus*' facilities did not long remain restricted to the Emperor alone. Rather did there develop a constant struggle on the part of several classes of high imperial officials who were trying to gain this much coveted right (*ius evectiois faciendae*).

Key personnel on which depended the entire operation of the *Cursus* was the stations' staff. In charge was a *manceps* or *praepositus*, whose duty it was to check on proper administration of travel documents, maximum loads, exclusive use of animals for *Cursus* purposes and to make sure that the local population perform their liturgical obligations in animals, hay or money. The staff (*familia*) included policemen (*stationarii*), veterinaries (*mulomedici*), stable-boys (*hippocomi*), cartwrights (*carpentarii*), all called helpers (*apparitores*) to the *manceps*. None of these jobs amounted to a sinecure and in the case of the *apparitores*, most of them were slaves attached to the *Cursus publicus* for life (*servi publici*). There are records indicating that regulations had been designed both to protect travellers against

the familiarities of tip-minded Cursus employees and to protect these employees against ill-treatment and abuse by travellers. As for the station masters, the popularity of their position may be judged from the fact that some possible candidates left town, others became hermits in the desert and still others married slave girls in order to be disqualified and escape being appointed manceps for the usual term of five years.

Originally, under the Republic, *manceps* had meant any contractor who obtained a state contract after having submitted the lowest tender on a road-building job (*manceps viarum*). And it would seem to the reader of the twentieth century that Rome might have developed a much better transportation and mail system if the Empire had continued on this judicious basis rather than introducing compulsion.

Already Plutarchus offers the first reference to a municipal magistrate being appointed station head and under Hadrianus the position has attained the doubtful advantage of being an honourable burden (*onus*). By 365, more and more notables having preferred exile or dishonour to the appointment as manceps, Valentinianus set a precedent by ordering that these station-heads should be recruited among lower municipal officials and in 377 these in turn were exempted while candidates were sought among pensioned and retired officials. Five years later and following bitter complaints by representatives of pensioned officialdom to the Emperor, they were freed of this unwelcome honour although it is not known who was supposed to replace them. This obscurity however is of little consequence since three years later (in 385) the status of 377 is restored calling for candidates from among retired officials of various services (*veterani diversorum officiorum*). A rider was added prescribing that in case the incumbent had entered the clergy he would remain exempt *personally* but his fortune would be forfeited to the Cursus.

All these reforms apparently did not work out too well since in 392 the municipal notables (*Curiales*) once again are made subject to the burdensome appointment as manceps. And by the turn of

the fifth century (403) a law shows that no way was left for the wealthy citizens of provincial towns to evade the excessive duties as station head which soon would engulf his entire fortune. Besides, their position between the people who had to supply animals, hay and sometimes lodgings, and travellers who were bent on abusing their privileges made their position most unenviable. And whenever war, drought, civil strife or a plague impoverished the people whose duty it was to support the Cursus Publicus, the manceps was held responsible with his own funds for the proper functioning of the service. The only consolation was that after satisfactory and ruinous service (5 years) they could obtain the title of *perfectissimus* and as such become exempted from further obligations towards the State (*munera sordida*).

WITH the couriers and messenger-officers who travelled by Cursus Publicus an entirely different class of Cursus officialdom is now to be studied. In the early days of the empire, *frumentarii* were the Imperial army's quartermasters whose very names still implied that originally they had to check on adequate supplies of bread grains (*frumentum*). As early as the second century A.D., these *frumentarii* (as well as their colleagues, the *tabellarii*) had already turned into spies and inspectors for their imperial master.

While purportedly checking on the entire Cursus Publicus system's operations they actually were supposed to keep an eye on any subversive activities throughout the Empire and reported directly to the Emperor. This secret police gradually assumed such confidential tasks that *tabellarii*—who usually were freed men or slaves—could no longer belong to it and were replaced in the third century with *agentes in rebus*, a meaningless title equivalent to "officials with different missions." Like the *frumentarii* and *tabellarii* had done before them, these *agentes in rebus* often abused their functions—accusing innocent people of subversive agitation in the hope of being bought off and generally blackmailing on a large scale throughout the country. Diocletianus cancelled the

frumentarii for this reason and the notable reformer Julianus in turn dissolved the *agentes in rebus* who had replaced them. But here as in so many others of Julianus' improvements, the *agentes* were re-established shortly after the Emperor's death mainly on account of their indispensable services to the tyrants' police state. After that they became even more powerful than before their temporary dissolution.

Originally comprised of retired members of the Emperor's body guard (*cohors palatina*), the corps of *agentes in rebus* (or *agentes rerum*) always showed certain similarities with a military body although it remained wholly separate from the army. Clothing too was of military inspiration: they wore the belt (*cingulum*) which on the Roman soldier held the sword, and their coat (*chlamys*) originally was a Greek soldier's tunic while the service they performed was called *militia*. Later they were grouped in a *schola* under the direction of a *magister officiorum*, a kind of chief of the civil servants.

Recruits had to pass a five-year probation period as *novi* and only after having proven their suitability were they accepted as permanent members of the force (*equites*). Further promotion to *circitores*, *biarchi*, *centenarii* and *ducenarii* came strictly according to seniority—except for some exceptional appointments made by the Emperor himself, in which case the appointee ranked last in his particular class. An illustration of their esprit de corps may be seen in the fact that an entire *schola* used to be present and its members were individually asked for their consent to the promotion or acceptance of a man into their ranks from the *novi* class. Usually the *agentes in rebus* served for 25 years, after which those who had attained the rank of *ducenarii* were given the title of *principes* for another two years and as such presided over groups of higher officials of the Roman bureaucracy. Often such men ended up as lieutenants over large parts of the Empire, sometimes whole provinces, and enjoyed numerous privileges.

As indicated previously their duties consisted chiefly in transmission of im-

perial messages and carrying out secret police missions. Investigation, inspection and administration were mainly in the hands of the higher-ranking *agentes* (*ducenarii* and *centenarii*) while lower-ranking *biarchi*, *circitores* and *equites* did messenger work (using the *Cursus Publicus*) and general police duties.

SPECIAL precautions were taken to try to ensure the impartiality of these officials. Thus no *agentes in rebus* could ever be sent on a mission into his native or family's province and he was to return to Rome immediately after completing his task. If he overstayed his travel permit's duration by up to six months he was set back five places on the seniority list while a delay of up to one year set him back ten places, etc. Later on the absence had to be justified to his superior or else the culprit was struck off the seniority list altogether.

Their numbers changed greatly during the corps' existence. Unrestricted at first, since the Emperor was allowed to appoint two extras in each class outside regular promotions, the corps' quality deteriorated noticeably and following complaints the poorest elements were weeded out in 359. It is unknown how many were dismissed during this shake-up but it is known that the complaints did not stop after it. Abuses still were committed by the *agentes* who acted more and more as what they were: spies for the Emperor.

In a drive to stamp out this festering sore, Julianus fired almost the entire corps, retaining but 17. Instead, he used his own (*ei autou*) slaves as imperial messengers. Soon after his death however, this reform was cancelled along with most of his other innovations and by 430, some 70 years after his death, the maximum number of *agentes* was at 1174. Twenty-five years later Emperor Leo (457-474) allowed them to reach the all-time high of 1248 at the same time limiting the members for each class as follows: 48 *ducenarii*, 200 *centenarii*, 250 *biarchi*, 300 *circitores* and 450 *equites*. Leo's wording of the decree indicated that he intended this to be the final limits—'sit in aeter-

num illa quoque fix'—but unfortunately no later records are available to confirm this to us.

Administration and supervision of the corps was the responsibility of the *magister officiorum* who also watched the ethical standards of recruits and looked after all personnel problems. Rigid acceptance rules prevailed and no heretics, Jews or freed men were admitted. Agents' relatives enjoyed a preference and by 396 brothers and sons of those having reached rank of *ducenarius* had to be admitted. Also those for whose character and qualifications higher officials would vouch were accepted after normal five-year probation period. And yet, despite all these precautions the record shows that complaints kept coming in about the corps' members overstepping their functions and rights. Constantly agents had to be fired or resigned in a hurry and still results were disappointing as demonstrated expressly in a law dated January 20, 416, in which it is stated that the *schola agentum in rebus* had become a real asylum for hooligans of every description.

Over-all control of the *Cursus Publicus* officials rested with a selected group of agents belonging to the higher class (*ducenarii* and *centenarii*). Usually referred to as *curiosi*—a term meaning careful, observing—these men were sent in pairs to the different provinces, one to supervise *Cursus* operations and the other to take into custody all criminals and procure evidence for judging them. Besides these perfectly legitimate tasks, the *curiosi*—like their predecessors, the *frumentarii*—went beyond their secret police duties, which required them to spy out any possible subversive activities, in order to gain personal advantages. More and more false accusations were launched by them wherever their blackmail miscarried and the resulting complaints led to their cancellation by the Emperor (in Rome around 399, in Italy, Illyria and Africa in 404, and elsewhere around 450).

WITHOUT running the risk of hasty generalization and taking into account the relatively scanty records which have been preserved concerning this in-

stitution of ancient Rome, it would seem that at least some cautious conclusions may be drawn from this study for which most of the fundamental research was done by the Swedish scholar, Erik J. Holmberg, in his *Geschichte des Cursus Publicus*.

First, even the strictest controls, most elaborate precautions and ruthless punishments could not prevent abuse by *Cursus Publicus* officials of the discretionary powers originally granted them by the Emperor, powers which they themselves gradually extended. Man being what he is, even a most carefully selected and apprenticed Roman who had entered the service with the best of references and the general consent of the entire body of sworn civil servants could eventually turn out to be nothing but a blackmailer, a hooligan and a thug. Then already, power corrupted man, and absolute power corrupted absolutely.

The second conclusion would be that, through a co-incidence or as a matter of cause and effect, no technical improvements of any significance are to be encountered in the field of transportation of goods, persons or mail for the very period during which this totalitarian system held sway throughout the then civilized world.

Thirdly, it is quite understandable that the *Cursus*, through its compulsion affecting its operating and administrative personnel as much as the people living along its network, could not but hinder the private transportation operators. And indeed, as from the troubled days of the third century, if not already much earlier, private overland and then private sea transport entered into a tailspin which would only end in total chaos and disruption with the disintegration of the Roman Empire itself.

As more and more the State encroached upon these private operations both by means of its *Cursus Publicus* and by taking over control of transportation operators' guilds, a gradually increasing portion of all freight and passenger movement tended to become a state responsibility.

As this situation developed, at first on land and after the reign of Alexander Severus also on sea, private transportation operators were being faced with the same

financial problem facing twentieth century railroads, with the only difference that today competition exists in air and truck transport while the Roman shippers were in a position of virtual monopoly. These carriers, both on land and on sea, were forced to accept state-owned consignments at wholly inadequate rates or at rates that barely allowed them to pay their out-of-pocket costs on the movement of those particular goods while other, privately-owned freight (mostly luxury goods) travelling by the same ship, cart or caravan actually allowed them to break even or to show a slight profit.

It is obvious that this precarious equilibrium could not be much more stable 1500 years ago than it is today and any disturbance in the high-class revenue freight was bound, then as now, to produce disastrous results on the entire field of vital bulk-freight transportation. In other words, the history of Rome's transportation shows that, even under fundamentally more favorable circumstances—absence of competition—it turned out to be impossible indefinitely to make high-class traffic pay the losses incurred on essential low-freight bulk traffic. Indeed, the very frantic efforts made to assure these vital shipments led to their disruption. Instead of leaving the setting of freight prices to the different carriers concerned, Imperial Rome more and more substituted its own dictates, forcing them out of business or—if it succeeded in keeping them as state carriers or *Cursus Publicus* officials—depriving them of all initiative and incentive to improve transportation. Meanwhile the key personnel of *Cursus* stations as well as the population dwelling along the *Cursus* network and in coastal cities tended more and more to flee from its burden and by the end of the West Roman Empire the once magnificent roads increasingly came to be regarded as nothing but convenient stone quarries from where one might pilfer well-hewn building material for more useful purposes.

With the advent of the Middle Ages

the pendulum completed its swing to the other extreme from that exemplified by the Roman *Cursus Publicus*. Instead of a central organization taxing all and sundry along the highway with a view to ensure fast transportation for a distant Emperor without any regard for local interests, the Middle Ages were to become famous for a highly decentralized set-up. Thousands of feudal potentates, treating their own particular section of the highway as their own, taxed anything and anybody passing over it for their own local benefit without paying any regard whatsoever to the interests of the nation's commerce as a whole. Were not the excesses of the centralizers to blame for the excesses of subsequent decentralization? Was not strict control of transportation, enforced in order to safeguard vital traffic, the very thing that ultimately contributed to this vital traffic's collapse?

These experiences of the Ancient World are interesting because today, too, some traffic is forced on certain carriers at uneconomical rates under the pretense that these freight movements are vital to the nation. It has been seen that in Rome this practice was known and—which should serve as a warning—was introduced towards the end of the Empire's greatness, shortly before it collapsed under the burden of its own maladministration more than under the blows of the enemy.

It would seem as if Rome's lesson had been heeded recently in Britain where the decision was taken to release that country's railways from rate restriction on the general ground of equity.

In the words of Professor Gilbert Walker, of Birmingham University, "no carrier must be put, deliberately or inadvertently, in the position of being burdened with a service or obligation at a rate or on terms which demonstrably do not cover the cost." Only common sense, some might be tempted to remark. Indeed, but this common sense was never accepted in Imperial Rome and it is not yet generally accepted in this country either.