

A GRAND
TOUR OF THE
ROMAN
EMPIRE

By the same authors

How to Manage Your Slaves

Release Your Inner Roman

A GRAND
TOUR OF THE
ROMAN
EMPIRE

MARCUS SIDONIUS FALX

with Jerry Toner

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AUTHOR'S NOTE



WHAT A WONDER is the Roman empire. Throughout its vast lands, stretching from Britannia in the north to Egypt in the south, from Hispania in the west to the Euphrates in the east, great cities glisten with fine marble and offer their citizens the utmost in public luxury. In the countryside, the fields flourish with an abundance of crops, and fecund herds graze the rich pastures. Everywhere, the population has boomed and prosperity abounds. I should know. My noble family's estates span the provinces of the empire, often acquired as rewards for our part in their conquest. When Philo of Byzantium long ago listed his Seven Wonders of the World, he had no clue of what was to come. These few sites have been outdone a hundred times by the glories of the Roman empire: its amphitheatres, its palaces, its aqueducts, its temples and its roads. No educated man should leave this world without having experienced them.

What would one wish for in a travelling companion on such a tour? A man of wit, charm and easy conversation, I would suggest. A man who can bear the occasional hardships encountered on the road and at sea with a calm and uncomplaining equanimity. A man

whose informed opinions could help while away the inevitable hours of delay with lively discussion on almost any subject, from the most serious matters of the day to the glories of the epic poets to the frivolities of gossip. What one would not choose is a *Brittunculus* – a nasty little Brit. A whingeing Brit, moreover, who has spent his entire life in the small town of *Duroliponte* and has a mind every bit as provincial as that suggests. A man whose classical education seems to have washed over him without leaving a trace and who prefers to decipher the scrawls and graffiti of the common plebs when he could be reading *Virgil*. A man who prefers beer to wine. Such a man is *Jerry Toner*. But for my guide to reach as wide an audience as it deserves, needs must. May the gods help me.

COMMENTATOR'S NOTE



TRAVEL AND TOURISM took off during the long centuries of the Roman peace, the *Pax Romana* of the empire, when travel was relatively safe and readily available and affordable, if not to a mass audience then to a much broader group than was historically the case. The huge grain ships heading to Rome to feed its underemployed crowds took with them hundreds of paying passengers, who slept out on the decks and prayed to the gods for their safe arrival. For the wealthy, making a tour of the highlights of Greece and Egypt was one of the benefits of empire, a way of deriving pleasure from places the Romans had conquered. But they were not only interested in seeing the sights. The accounts they wrote of their trips contained long excursions on the mythology connected with each place, its history, the logistics of their journey, and ruminations about all kinds of other issues. Falx's own text is of a similar vein and represents a kind of Baedeker of the ancient world. Needless to say, the fact that I have helped bring it to publication does not mean I approve of many of the views expressed within it.

The stability of the Roman empire also encouraged

many other forms of travel: imperial representatives and officials went where they were sent to perform local governmental tasks and oversee important projects, while soldiers moved to wherever they were stationed. Wealthy landowners would travel to inspect their estates. Trade and commerce thrived, and merchants transported their wares to markets throughout the empire, often settling down in the process. Artists and craftsmen went where the work was, and all kinds of street entertainers, fortune tellers and religious practitioners passed through towns in search of an audience. The rich sent their young to learn the skills of oratory at the great schools in Greece, while the sick went in search of cures at the renowned healing centres. The famed network of roads, while primarily for military use, also encouraged travel. It was as if the Roman empire were in perpetual motion. All these travellers took their cultures with them and the result was that many of the large cities acquired a new level of cosmopolitanism. People took their gods with them, too, and religions from the eastern part of the empire introduced new kinds of religious experience that were very different from those of the traditional pantheon.

Acting as Marcus Sidonius Falx's secretary during a long and gruelling tour of the vast Roman empire has been an experience I shall never forget. There have been highs: the great sites and shrines of the cities, the strange rituals, and the overwhelming diversity. But there have been many lows: the casual indifference towards the suffering of many, the overweening arrogance towards provincials, the unswerving belief in the superiority of

Rome and its values. Empire forced travel upon many. The crushing of revolts such as those of the Jews resulted in the displacement of whole peoples. Millions more slaves were shipped away from their homelands to wherever their owners decreed. But Falx merely reflects what we find in our sources. We hear so much more about what the Romans thought – wealthy Romans at that – than we do about those they ruled. As with so much of the Roman world, we find some material that is understandable, but a great deal also that stretches the imagination and makes us work hard to comprehend their world view. Looking at the evidence always makes me realise how much of the ancient world is lost to us.

Marcus is coy about his age but most of his views reflect those of the High Empire, that time praised by Gibbon as the period in the history of the world when the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous. None of what Falx says is pure fiction. It is all based on a range of contemporary sources, although these have often been adapted to make them more easily accessible to a modern audience. I have added brief commentaries to his account at the end of each chapter to put some of his opinions into context and to counteract some of his unthinking biases. Alongside the suggested further reading at the end of the book, these will guide those who are interested in digging deeper to where they can find out more about the underlying primary sources, who wrote them and why, and to modern academic discussions.

› CHAPTER I ›

A GRAND TOUR



THE EMPEROR HAD SUMMONED ME. Guards directed me to a broad terrace on the spur of the Palatine hill where he was walking in an agitated manner, followed by a gaggle of advisers. He is very tall and extremely pale, with an unshapely, hairy body. He also has a very thin neck and legs, and hollow eyes that sink below a broad forehead, above which his thinning hair sticks out in wisps. He is touchy about his baldness and it is forbidden to look down on him from any higher place. His face is naturally threatening but he works hard to make it all the more so by practising savage expressions in front of a mirror.

‘Ah Falx!’ he greeted me, ‘Here is a man who will give me a straight answer. Tell me, Falx, what would you do to improve the empire?’

‘O emperor, what a question is this,’ I began, and, wishing to assure him of the impossibility of the task, added, ‘as the proverb says, you are asking me to milk a he-goat!’

The emperor stopped as if he had been hit by a bolt from Jupiter. His entourage stared at me in horror at what I had said. How was I to know that the emperor's touchiness about his straggly hair and knock-kneed physique extended to a ban of any mention of goats! A lesser man would have faced execution.

'Get away from here,' he snarled with his most terrifying glare, 'and keep away – well away.'

I scuttled out of the palace. Unnerved, I have faced the barbarian hordes in battle, but I do not mind admitting that fear now made me sweat like the Tiber in full flow. I had offended the emperor and had been told to make myself scarce. It was time to lie low for a while.

I decided it was best for me to leave Rome and to do so quickly. I would travel first thing down to my villa at Baiae. But the emperor himself is known to enjoy holidaying at that seaside resort so I could hardly stay there for long. I considered my properties in north Africa, the large estates I had inherited from my uncle in Gaul, the olive farms in Hispania I had bought many years ago to import oil into Rome. All were suitably far away. And then there was so much of our great empire that I had never seen. I had studied in Athens as a young man but had not returned since. I had experienced the chaos of Alexandria for some weeks when sent on official business but had not had time to make the leisurely journey up the Nile to see the wonders of the pharaohs. And then there was my son, Titus, who was commanding forces up on the wall in the farthest-flung corner of icy Britannia. What better opportunity to surprise him and deliver in person those socks he is always asking my wife to send.

I realised that it was my chance to tour the empire. But a guidebook to help such a task was sorely lacking. I had read various travels guides to parts of Greece but they were mostly written by Greeks who were determined to try to revive the glories of their ancient past. With their endless tales of the Greeks' victories against the Persians, their detailed accounts of their local myths and customs, it is as if their present-day subservience to Rome does not exist. I decided that I would take this opportunity to write a guidebook for all the most memorable places and monuments throughout the whole empire, to be written in ten books. No one, not even a Greek, has ever attempted a grand tour of the entire Roman empire.

There is a great need for such a guide. Almost the whole world seems to be travelling back and forth across the empire. Why? Men travel for a whole range of reasons. Some go in search of education and spend years in Greece at the feet of philosophers. Many senators, as my father did, send their sons to Athens to hone the skills of oratory that will be so important to their careers in public life. What educated man is less than fluent in Greek, which he must master in order to adorn his speeches with a liberal scattering of apt quotes of the great bard, Homer? Others go looking for health. How many have made the long trek to Pergamum to consult the healing god Asclepius in his lavish sanctuary there. Aided by the attendants, they sleep in the temple precincts so that the god himself might visit in a dream and tell them what course of treatment to pursue. Or they go to consult with the great practitioners of Greek

medicine, who can diagnose the humoral imbalances responsible for their illnesses.

Many travel for trade. Wherever you go, you see cargoes coming from as far off as southern Arabia and even India, in such numbers that their lands must have been stripped bare of spices. Nearer to home, the farmlands of Egypt and north Africa transport their rich harvests in the huge grain ships that are the lifeblood of the city of Rome. It is a wonder that there is space in the sea for so many ships.

Naturally, it is the common classes who travel for money. Those who can afford a life of leisure often make tours to explore the many interests that the empire has to offer. Human nature is such that we are curious about other peoples and places, and are keen to travel. Many make sea voyages, and endure long solitary journeys alone, simply to see some remote sight. For nature, self-conscious of her own beauty, made us natural admirers of her attractions. So people are eager to see with their own eyes anything special they have read or heard about. Of course, with some, this urge to travel becomes almost a sickness. Because they don't know what they want, are too fond of soft living, and yearn perpetually after something meaningful, which otherwise eludes them, they indulge in a pointless roaming across the earth's surface. Natural marvels, places where miracles have occurred, zoological curiosities, bizarre customs of far-off people – all are pursued with a desperate thirst for experience that no amount of such travel seems to slake.

These idle rich wander aimlessly, travel along distant shores, sometimes by sea, other times on land, always

trying to calm some inner restlessness. 'Let's go to Campania!' they will say. But they will soon grow bored and long for wild places and head off for Lucania or the like. But, once there, they will pine for beauty and sophistication and rush down to Tarentum to enjoy its pleasant climate. And no sooner have they arrived than they will miss the noise and bustle of Rome and be overcome with a desire to see some bloodshed at the Colosseum. So one journey succeeds another, and one sight is changed for another. They seem to be fleeing from themselves.

It is the Roman empire that has made all of this travel possible. The immense majesty of the Roman peace and its excellent network of communications by both road and sea has generated an ease and security of travel that only serves to increase this wanderlust. We Romans have mapped out the world, bridged rivers, cut roads through mountains, and have filled wastelands with posting stations where officials can find an inn to stay and a stable to provide fresh horses. Yet hardly any of those non-Romans who wish to know about touring the jewels of the empire have any idea where to start. This guide will tell them all they need to know.

What glories shall we see? To begin with there is the architecture. Were all other knowledge of the Roman world to be lost, so many huge ruins would survive that it would be clear what a mighty civilisation had built them. The arches, bath houses, cupolas, bridges and aqueducts all tell of a prosperity that no previous age ever came close to matching and I cannot imagine that any human society will ever surpass. The so-called Seven Wonders

of the World date from the time when Alexander had recently conquered the Persian empire, and reflect the narrow outlook of the Greeks: Alexandria, Rhodes, Olympia, Halicarnassus, Ephesus, Memphis and Babylon. But Roman prosperity and building skill have seen the continuous growth and embellishment of cities across the empire. There are now some 250 cities in Tarraconese Hispania alone. Even those founded by the Greeks, such as Alexandria, have blossomed under Roman rule. And everywhere, all these cities are captivated by one aim: to outdo their rivals and neighbours and to appear the loveliest of all. Even in those formerly barbarian regions of the north, there are triumphal arches, paved piazzas, marble temples and stone amphitheatres. They gleam in splendour and the whole world seems to have turned to pleasure and magnificence.

We shall see the graves of the heroes of old, such as the tomb of Achilles at Troy. We shall go in search of the heroes of more recent times and follow in Alexander's footsteps as he set off on his great trek into the Persian empire. We shall see the famed battle sites of the Persian wars, where the Athenians and their allies first drove back the Persian aggressor. And we shall visit places where other famous men have lived, sat and talked, such as the house of Socrates in Athens.

The gods will be at the heart of our journey. We shall experience the divine places where long ago the gods were born. We shall visit many important sanctuaries and shrines, which have gradually acquired vast arrays of priceless objects as gifts donated by grateful worshippers. Great art will be high on our agenda. Those two

great masterpieces, Phidias's Zeus and Myron's bronze cow, will both feature. As will places of literary fame. We shall see the ruins of Troy and the beach where the Greeks first landed in their attempt to wrest back Helen. And we shall experience the beauty that only nature herself can offer, such as the vale of Tempe, where the river Peneus meanders through avenues of trees, with grassy-green banks, while birds sing from the treetops. In short, this guide will give you knowledge of peoples, their customs and their past; and of places, famous for their beauty, history or peculiarity.

You too will experience the benefits of the Roman empire. You will see how the world is more cultivated and richer than before and how every place is thriving. Fertile fields have replaced deserts, and cornfields have replaced forests. Swamps have been drained and there are now as many cities as there once were hovels. Every nook teems with civilised life. Roman domination has brought an end to those interminable wars between local tribes, who now cannot even remember a time when they had the ability to commit such reckless military follies.

To be ruled by us Romans is to find yourself under the power of superiors. We control a vast empire with a rule that is firm but not unkind. This happy experience has moved the whole world to hang on tight to Rome. The world would no more think of leaving Rome than a ship's crew would think of parting company with its pilot. Have you seen bats in a cave grabbing tightly to one another as they hang from the rocks? Thus does the world cling to Rome. All men pay their taxes to her with greater pleasure than some people would collect

them from others. All the common people can appeal to the emperor for help. It is a state of affairs that is both pleasing and advantageous to rich and poor alike. Nobody ever considers an alternative and there are no dissenting voices.

It is as if the entire empire is on a perpetual holiday. The only people who deserve our pity are those few who still reside outside our empire. Let us pray that the gods grant that this empire and the great city of Rome flourish forever and only fall when stones float on water and blossom stops blooming in the spring. And let us pray that the great emperor and his sons be preserved and obtain blessings for all.

But, interrupting my day-dreaming, I realised that there was no time to waste. It was time to leave the city in case the emperor should decide to send his men after me. Traffic is banned in daylight in Rome so I had four of my slaves carry me in a curtained sedan chair until we were outside the city limits. There I transferred to a small wagon, whose wheels creaked viciously despite the application of extra animal fat to the axles to lubricate them, and in which I was able to stay out of sight under an awning.

It is an age-old tradition that travellers who set off on a journey, whether by land or water, pledge to fulfil some kind of vow on reaching their destination safely. The vow I took as I looked back at the gleaming towers of the great city was not the usual stupid and irrelevant sort. I simply vowed that, if I returned safely, I would dedicate my guide to the emperor in the hope of regaining his favour.

·· COMMENTARY ··



The description of the highly sensitive emperor is based on that of Caligula, who certainly seems to have been more touchy than most. Senators who fell out of imperial favour might, if they were lucky, have travel imposed upon them in the form of exile to some provincial backwater or isolated island, where they would hope that they might be recalled once the emperor's anger had calmed. Despite falling foul of the imperial temper, Falx has nothing but praise for the Roman empire, and his paean is based on the Greek orator Aelius Aristides' second-century CE *Panegyric to Rome*, which certainly has no room for any dissenting voices. Whether all of Rome's subject peoples saw their subordination as Falx does is hard to say as they left so few sources. Later Jewish sources express a resigned animosity towards an empire that had brutally suppressed their people on no less than three occasions. But many Christians, who we might imagine were hostile to Rome, did not fail to appreciate its material advantages and the description of the empire's boom is based on that of the Church Father, Tertullian (*On the Cloak* 2.7). We shall experience other counter views in later stages of the journey, but it is certainly true to say that the Roman peace made travel safer and more widespread. Much of this was associated with trade but there was also a growth in what we would call tourism of a variety of kinds. Falx's description of a rich set who flit about the empire is based on Seneca (*On the Tranquil*

Mind 2.13), who is dismissive of this vacuous group. Seneca's view cannot be taken as representative of wider opinion since he is positioning himself as a philosophical thinker in such texts. More likely, his view is an outlier, and most of the elite were happy to enjoy the pleasures of travel. To do so obviously required both leisure and money, and it was certainly not open to many outside the wealthiest classes, although more ordinary Romans, such as traders, could combine seeing the world with earning a living.

Making a grand tour of the sights was closely connected with empire, representing a kind of visual appropriation of Rome's conquests. Many powerful Romans went further and sought to express this urge by physically collecting and copying the great works of art they saw in the Greek world. Augustus adorned Rome with works such as Myron's Zeus, which he placed on the Capitoline hill, and the Aphrodite of Apelles, considered the greatest painter, which he placed in his forum. Most of this sculpture and painting was between two and four hundred years old so it is clear that the Romans were mostly interested in what we would call Old Masters. Great Art of this kind was also high on the tourist agenda. The three most famous works were probably Phidias's statue of Zeus in Olympia, Praxiteles' Aphrodite in Cnidus in Asia Minor, and the bronze cow by Myron on the acropolis in Athens. Much of this fine art was to be found in temples, just as it was later to be placed in Christian churches, as a result of donations by worshippers. Falx's decision to tour beyond the famous sites of the East was perhaps inspired by the travels of the

emperor Hadrian, who spent over half his reign outside Italy. Unlike previous emperors who had largely relied on representatives to keep them informed about goings-on in the provinces, Hadrian wanted to see it first-hand and he visited almost every province of the empire, instigating various building projects, such as his famous wall in the north of Britannia.

It is not known for certain who first came up with the Seven Wonders of the World. Antipater of Sidon listed seven great monuments he had seen, in about 100 BCE, but included the walls of Babylon instead of the lighthouse at Alexandria. At roughly the same time, Philo of Byzantium wrote a short description of the seven sights most worth seeing in the world. Other lists also existed and their proliferation is itself best seen as an index of the growth in ancient tourism in the Hellenistic world. Most of the lists focused on ancient man-made buildings, such as the pyramids and the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, with only two more contemporary edifices being included: the Pharos lighthouse and the Colossus at Rhodes. This latter was the last of the seven to be completed, soon after 280 BCE, but was destroyed in an earthquake in 225 BCE, meaning that all seven coexisted for not much more than half a century (if, that is, the hanging gardens of Babylon ever existed at all).