

Migration and the Metropolis

The Mediterranean: early morning, fine weather. View from the forward deck of a ship, the prow cutting through the waves. Sound: water, wind, occasional shouts from elsewhere on deck.

Voice 1 (an old man, reminiscing): Why, oh Lord, did I leave my home in Africa to travel to Italy? It was not because I could earn higher fees and greater honours as a teacher of literature that I wanted to go to Rome, though these were the rewards promised me by my friends, who urged me to go. Naturally these considerations influenced me, but the most important reason, and almost the only one, was that I had heard that the behaviour of young students at Rome was quieter. Discipline was stricter and they were not permitted to rush insolently and just as they pleased into the lecture-rooms of teachers who were not their own masters. In fact they were not admitted at all without the master's permission. At Carthage, on the other hand, the students are beyond control and their behaviour is disgraceful. As a student I had refused to take part in this behaviour, but as a teacher I was obliged to endure it in others. My life at Carthage was a real misery and I loathed it: but the happiness I hoped to find at Rome was not real happiness . . .

My mother wept bitterly to see me go and followed me to the water's edge, clinging to me with all her strength in the hope that I would either come home or take her with me. I deceived her; for I pretended that I had a friend whom I could not leave until the wind rose and his ship could sail. It was a lie, told to my own mother — and to such a mother, too! But she would not go home without me and it was all I could do to persuade her to stay that night in a shrine dedicated to Saint Cyprian, not far from the ship. During the night, secretly, I sailed away, leaving her alone to her tears and her prayers.¹

The ship reaches harbour. Cut to a series of images of people embarking and flowing into a crowd moving towards and past the viewer. Sound: a jumble of voices, accents, languages, some sufficiently distinct to be understood.

Voice 2 (a woman in her 30s): I came from Thrace with my sister, whose husband is *beneficarius* of the tenth cohort of the Praetorian Guard in the city.²

Voice 3 (a man in his 50s): While still a youth I left Nicaea in Bithynia and came to Rome to teach accounts and measures.³

¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, V.8.

² CIL VI: 2734.

³ IGUR 1176.

Voice 4 (a man in his 20s): I left Egypt and became an imperial freedman at Rome so as to gain citizenship and gain access to an official appointment in the civil service.⁴

Voice 5 (a man in his 40s): As a sculptor whose skills are always in demand, I passed through many cities, accompanied by my wife and son, before settling here.⁵

Voice 6 (a woman in her 60s): My husband is a dealer in *garum* from Malaga and an officer of the Corporation of Traders there, but he stays here to oversee the business.⁶

A confusion of voices: I came from Phrygia as a slave. I came from Smyrna as a slave. I came from Carthage as a slave. I came from Thebes as a slave.⁷

Voice 7 (a man in his 50s, with an exaggeratedly harsh manner): I cannot put up with a city of Greeks. [a sudden hush] And yet how much of this dregs is truly Achaean? The Syrian Orontes has long been discharging into the Tiber, carrying with it its language and morals and slanting strings, complete with piper, not to speak of its native timbrels and the girls who are told by their owners to ply their trade at the race track . . .⁸

This voice is gradually drowned by the noise of the crowd, pressing onwards towards Rome. Dissolve to a view of their destination, at a distance.

Narrator: Rome was the greatest city of the ancient world: the largest and the richest, grown fat on the spoils of empire. It seems scarcely surprising that it should attract large numbers of migrants; but perhaps we should not take this so easily for granted. We, after all, come from a world of ceaseless movement and instability, driven by the demands of the capitalist economy.⁹ The ancient world lacked both the technology and the motivation for such mobility. The Roman Empire brought about an unprecedented degree of movement of peoples through the Mediterranean: armies, captives, administrators, ambassadors, traders.¹⁰ Even so, the vast majority of its inhabitants lived and died in the same locality, and even those who were sent abroad by the empire doubtless hoped to return home. The fact that significant numbers of people left their homes and settled in the city of Rome does require explanation, and

⁴ P.Oxy xlv 3312, discussed by Noy (2000), 25-6.

⁵ IGUR 1222.

⁶ CIL VI. 9677.

⁷ AE (1972) 14.

⁸ Juvenal, *Sat.* 3.60-5.

⁹ Works on migration in the modern world include Cohen (1987), Chambers (1994), Pooley & Turnball (1998), Rappaport & Dawson (1998), Van Hear (1998).

¹⁰ See e.g. Stanley (1990).

the consequences both for the migrants and for the city as a whole need to be explored.¹¹

*Approaching Rome, the view is dominated by the lines of tombs on either side of the road. Dissolve to a series of images of tombs, columbaria, the catacombs.*¹²

Narrator: Death pervaded ancient Rome. As was the case in other pre-industrial cities, mortality rates were significantly higher there than in the countryside.¹³ Urban living conditions, and the sheer density of people, provided ideal conditions for the rapid spread of disease.¹⁴ Moreover, certain pathogens, such as measles and smallpox, were endemic in the city.¹⁵ Whereas other regions of the empire suffered only occasional epidemics, devastating in the short term but easily compensated for with an increase in the birth rate, Rome's population was constantly at risk from diseases which most often affected the young, before they had a chance to reproduce.

Images: scenes of plague, bodies lying in the streets, the burial pits on the Esquiline.

Voice 1: At Rome I was at once struck down by illness, which all but carried me off to hell loaded with all the evil that I had committed against you, Lord, against myself and against other men. My fever rose. I came close to dying, close to losing my soul.¹⁶

Cut to a book-lined study in which we find the Historian. She is clearly a little uneasy about the conflicting demands of entertainment and scholarship, but determined to make the best of things..

Historian: Of course, we don't actually have much evidence for any of this; we're scarcely better off than the emperor Elegabalus, who tried to estimate the population of Rome from the weight of cobwebs that had been collected in the city.¹⁷ On the other hand, we don't have any good reason for believing that the demographic structures of Rome were significantly different from those of other pre-industrial cities which we *do* know something about, and there's no denying the existence of 'urban

¹¹ Cf. Horden & Purcell (2000) 377-400, who see mobility as characteristic of the Mediterranean world throughout its history, although they do acknowledge the possibility of a 'cultural predilection' for continuity and stability (384).

¹² Hopkins (1983) ch. 4; Purcell (1987); Patterson (1992).

¹³ 'Urban natural decrease': Wrigley (1967) 134-5; Finlay (1981); de Vries (1984) 179-97. Cf. Scheidel in this volume.

¹⁴ Scobie (1986); Manchester (1992); Morley (1996) 39-42.

¹⁵ Grmek (1989) 89, 177-97, 277-82; Sallares (1991) 243, 244-62; Morley (1996) 42-3.

¹⁶ August. *Confessions* V.9.

¹⁷ Hume (1875) 414, citing SHA *Heliogab.* 26. Generally on the problems of studying Roman demography, Hopkins (1974) and Parkin (1992).

natural decrease' there. The importance of ancient evidence can often be over-estimated.

Cut to more scenes of people travelling towards Rome.

Narrator: The urban population was unable to reproduce itself; simply to maintain a steady level, the million or so estimated for the time of Augustus, Rome needed thousands of migrants, perhaps ten thousand or more, every year.¹⁸ In the period of its rapid expansion in the last two centuries BCE, the numbers must have been even greater. Some migrants came willingly, in search of fame or fortune; some came for want of a better alternative, fleeing war, famine or economic crisis; many were brought against their will, to serve the needs of the conquerors of the world. A lucky few were able to return home if they wished; most died in an alien city. Rome consumed bodies as insatiably as it consumed food, wine and other goods.¹⁹

Back to the study.

Historian: It gives a misleading impression to talk of Rome 'needing' migrants.²⁰ We have to deduce the importance of migration from the size of the city, but we mustn't forget that it was actually the other way round: the size of Rome was a consequence of the level of migration. Given what we know of problems with the city's food supply, it seems perfectly possible that Rome would have worked better with a lower population; but, as modern experience shows, even if the authorities perceive a problem with the level of immigration there are strict limits on their ability to deal with it.²¹

Images of the streets of Rome, crowded and bustling.

Voice 8 (a man in his 40s): Behold this concourse of men, for whom the houses of immense Rome scarcely suffice: most of this throng are now deprived of their country. From their towns and colonies, from the whole world, in fact, they have flocked hither. Some have been brought by ambition, some by the obligation of a public office, some by an envoy's duty having been laid upon them, some seeking a convenient and rich field for luxuria, some by a desire for study, some by the public spectacles; some have been drawn by friendship, some, seeing the ample opportunity for displaying energy by the chance to work; some have presented their beauty for sale, some their eloquence — every class of person has swarmed into the city that

¹⁸ Morley (1996) 43-6.

¹⁹ Extensive discussion of the evidence for migrants, their backgrounds and motivation, in Noy (2000).

²⁰ *Contra* Morley (1996) 44, and Noy (2000) 31.

²¹ Food supply: Garnsey (1988), 167-243; Rickman (1991) on the Tiber bottleneck; Noy (2000) 37-41, on expulsion of foreigners in times of food crisis.

offers high prizes for both virtues and vice. Give orders that each be called by name and asked 'Where do you come from?' You shall see that the greater part have left behind the place where they were born and come to this city, the greatest, the most beautiful city, perhaps, but not their own.²²

Images: a series of faces, emphasising variety of age and physiognomy; few women. Captions underneath each one:

Doctor; Lawyer; Teacher; Philosopher; Goldsmith; Dancer; Sculptor; Stonemason; Wine Merchant; Carpenter; Actor; Gladiator; Poet; Prostitute; Tallest Man in the World.²³

Narrator: These migrants have two things in common. First, they all made a living by servicing the needs and desires of the wealthy Roman elite, which funded its luxurious lifestyle from the proceeds of empire. Second, they were sufficiently successful in their professions to be able to afford tombstones, in many cases having first managed to obtain their freedom, or they were sufficiently prominent in city life to attract the attention of elite writers. Other migrant workers, equally vital to the life of the city, failed to leave a trace in the epigraphic evidence: building workers, porters, dockhands and the like, men who were either unskilled or simply unable to find an opening in their chosen profession.²⁴

Images: construction sites, the docks, the streets of Rome.

Voice 9 (male, scholarly): The Emperor Vespasian was once offered a machine which would haul some huge columns up to the Capitol. He rewarded the inventor but declined the invention: 'I must always ensure,' he said, 'that the poor plebs can earn enough money to buy food.'²⁵

Historian: Vespasian as a Keynesian *avant la lettre*? It seems unlikely. Nevertheless, the fact that this story was told of the emperor is significant in itself. We must never underestimate the importance of hope — one of those irrational emotions which historians find it so difficult to discuss. It was hope that brought people to Rome — few if any, besides the slaves, can have arrived in full certainty that they would be able to find proper employment. It was hope, including the hope founded on the knowledge that the emperor cared for his subjects, that kept the peace in the face of dramatic economic and social inequalities. Or so one might speculate.

²² Seneca *Ad Helviam* 6.2-3.

²³ References in Noy (2000), 90-123. Cf. Treggiari (1980).

²⁴ Brunt (1980), *contra* Casson (1978).

²⁵ Suetonius *Vesp.* 18.

Images: groups of men, sullen and bedraggled, standing or sitting idly; some playing with dice, some staring with resentment at the camera. A striking contrast with the ceaseless movement that has dominated the screen until now.

Narrator: Free wage labour was always marginal in antiquity. What little work was available depended on the season, and workers were hired on a daily basis; the labourer's position was highly precarious.²⁶ In Rome, in contrast, wage labour played a far more significant role, perhaps second only to slavery. Work was available all year round; on the other hand, there were always far more available workers than jobs. The urban elite benefited from the effects of competition on wages, but they also had to deal with the presence of a large group of people, predominantly younger men, who were intermittently unemployed and largely alienated from the traditional social structure.

Voice 10 (male, tones of moral outrage): All who were especially conspicuous for their shamelessness and impudence, those too who had squandered their patrimony in riotous living; finally all whom disgrace or crime had forced to leave home, had all flowed into Rome as into a cesspool. Many, too, who recalled Sulla's victory, when they saw common soldiers risen to the rank of senator and others become so rich that they feasted and lived like kings, hoped each for himself for like fruits of victory, if he took the field. Besides this, the young men who had maintained a wretched existence by manual labour in the country, tempted by public and private doles had come to prefer idleness in the city to their hateful toil: these, like all the others, battered on the public ills.²⁷

Voice 11 (male, official): Emperors Gratian, Valentinian and Theodosius Augusti to Severus, Prefect of the City. If there should be any persons who adopt the profession of mendicancy and who are inclined to seek their livelihood at public expense, each of them shall be examined. The soundness of body and the vigour of years of each of them shall be investigated. In the case of those who are lazy and not to be pitied on account of any physical disability, the necessity shall be placed upon them that the zealous and diligent informer shall obtain the ownership of those beggars who are held bound by their servile status, and such informer shall be supported by the right to the perpetual conscription of labour of those beggars who are attended by only the liberty of their birth rights, provided that the informer should betray and prove such sloth.²⁸

The Forum: bustling, crowded, a confused mass, as senators mingle with beggars.

²⁶ Garnsey (1980). Cf. Matthew 20.1-16.

²⁷ Sallust *Cat.* 37. Cf. Whittaker (1993) 1-3.

²⁸ *Codex Theodosianus* 14.18 (382 CE).

Narrator: The Roman elite mistook some of the symptoms of the peculiar nature of the urban economy for the disease itself; the same may be said of their often-repeated complaints about the dominance of money in urban social relations.²⁹ They responded in a similar manner to any signs of change in the existing social structure. High levels of mortality in the city created the conditions for social mobility, even into the senatorial order, as ‘new men’ were recruited to fill the depleted ranks.³⁰ Some at least of those rising in society — even at the very highest level, as the Senate began to draw members from outside Italy — were migrants, including ex-slaves. But this process was perceived by some members of the elite not as replacement but displacement, not as a renewal of Roman society but as a dilution of its central values.

The camera focuses on the red face, bulging eyes and violent gestures of Umbricius, who turns out to be Voice 7 from the beginning of the programme.

Umbricius: Why should our friend here sign before me as a witness and recline above me at dinner — one who was blown to Rome by the wind, with figs and damsons?

Interviewer (off camera): If he is a citizen, and a man of integrity, why not?

Umbricius: Does it count for nothing at all that I, from earliest childhood, breathed the Aventine air and was fed on the Sabine berry?

Interviewer: Tradition says that Romulus built up his city by welcoming all-comers, including criminals and escaped slaves, and making them citizens.³¹ Surely that offers a different idea about what it is to be ‘Roman’, not just a matter of birth?

Umbricius: There’s no room here for any Roman; the city is ruled by some Protogenes or other, some Diphilus or Hermarchus.

Interviewer: You haven’t answered the question.

Umbricius: They are making for the Esquiline and the Viminal, intent on becoming the vital organs and eventual masters of our leading houses. I must get away from them and their purple clothes.

Interviewer: You talk as if this was a recent phenomenon. Foreigners have been coming to Rome for centuries. There can be few people in this city who don’t have a bit of foreign blood in them.

²⁹ E.g. Juv. *Sat.* 3.140-4.

³⁰ Hopkins (1983) ch. 2.

³¹ Livy 1.8.4-6; Plutarch *Rom.* 9.

Umbricius: And look at them! Wearing their *trechedipna*, with their *niceteria* around their *ceromatic* necks! Oh, Romulus, if you could see your people now . . .

The camera pulls back to view the studio audience, laughing and applauding. The Interviewer tries unsuccessfully to keep a straight face, but 'Umbricius' remains in character, striking dramatic poses of outrage.

Narrator: 'Umbricius' is by no means the first or last comic creation whose words have been taken at face value even or especially by those whose values and rhetoric his creator had set out to satirise.³² He speaks for those who had everything to lose from any change in the existing social order. Although much of his diatribe is directed against those whom he perceived as competing with him for a limited fund of status and resources, his anxieties encompass city life as a whole. Underlying his litany of complaint is a deep-seated fear of the dissolution of social boundaries and the loss of identity, of being bruised and crushed by the workings of the urban economy, of being swallowed up by the crowd and ceasing to exist as an individual.

Moving through the crowd, the camera is jostled and buffeted by passers-by.

Voice of Umbricius: Hurrying through the streets of Rome we are blocked by a wave in front; behind, a massive multitude crushes my pelvis; *he* digs in with an elbow, *he* with a hard-wood pole; then *he* hits my head with a beam, and *he* with a wine-jar. A giant fir-tree on a swaying cart comes bearing down; another wagon carries a pine; they nod overhead and threaten the people. For if the axle transporting Ligurian marble collapses, tipping its mountainous load down on the hordes beneath, what is left of their bodies? Who can identify their limbs or bones? Each casualty's corpse is crushed out of existence, just like his soul.

Narrator: Such fears were surely common to migrants as well as natives. The latter feared the loss of their social position, their status and identity; the former had already lost them, in the act of moving to the city. This might present itself as an opportunity, for those who, freed from old social ties, had the resources and the good fortune to enable them to construct a new identity for themselves. It might equally be perceived as a threat to their survival.

Tombs: beginning with the conventional, moving on to the lavish and ostentatious monuments of Sestus and Eurysaces, culminating in a series of epitaphs in Greek and Hebrew.

³² On Umbricius, Winkler (1983) 220-3, Braund (1996) 230-6.

Narrator: Some migrants were able to reinvent themselves completely as Romans, parading their acquisition of citizenship in their new language. Others sought to preserve links with their former life, continuing to identify themselves with their homeland through language or religion.³³ Many, natives as well as migrants, sought new forms of community, in *collegia*, *stationes*, neighbourhood cults or taverns.³⁴ All, even the elite, had to struggle to establish some kind of stability in the face of the chaos and constant flux of urban life.³⁵

Voice 12 (male, pensive): In our own city we were like foreigners wandering and drifting, until your books, Varro. led us, so to speak, right home, and enabled us at last to realise who and what we were.³⁶

Voice 10 (still outraged): The plebeians are now much mixed with foreign blood, freedmen have equal rights of citizenship with them and slaves are dressed in the same fashion as their masters.³⁷

A rapid, confused montage of buildings, juxtaposing squat, rustic temples with marble-clad Hellenising edifices, elegant domus with dingy insulae, the Rostra with the temple of the Deified Iulius, and a whole array of 'foreign' architecture — obelisks, pyramid tombs, theatres.

Voice 13: What a city is to its boundaries and its territories, so this city is to the whole inhabited world. Just as the earth's ground supports all men, so it receives men from every land, just as the sea receives the rivers.³⁸

Narrator: Rome itself was too large and too fragmented to serve as a focus for the identity of its inhabitants, even if it continued to fulfil that role for the people of the empire. Death and money combined to create a world of constant fluidity and uncertainty. Migration overturned boundaries and undermined stable notions of separation and distance.³⁹ Other cultures were no longer encountered only at the periphery, or paraded as the spoils of conquest, but paraded themselves in the centre of daily life and in the heart of Romanitas. There was no longer one single model of how to live in the city, or even — if this is not actually the same thing — of what it meant to be Roman.

³³ Noy (2000) 157-60, 164-97.

³⁴ MacMullen (1974) 68-86; Stambaugh (1988) 208-12; Whittaker (1993) 23; Noy (2000) 160-4 on *stationes*; Hermansen (1981) 185-205 on taverns.

³⁵ Cf. Whittaker (1993) 16-17 on anxieties about status and social mobility.

³⁶ Cicero *Acad.* 1.9

³⁷ Sallust *BC* 2.120

³⁸ Aelius Aristides *Or.* 26.61-2

³⁹ Chambers (1994) 2

We move from the architectural confusion of Republican Rome — the temples of the Largo Argentina, the Forum, the narrow streets — to the elegance and unity of the imperial Fora, the complex around the Ara Pacis, and Nero's new streets.

Voice 14 (male, academic): Signals, styles, systems of rapid, highly conventionalized communication, are the lifeblood of the big city. It is when these systems break down — when we lose our grasp on the grammar of urban life — that violence takes over. The city is soft, amenable to the dazzling and libidinous variety of lives, dreams, interpretations. But the very plastic qualities which make the great city the liberator of human identity also cause it to be especially vulnerable to psychosis and totalitarian nightmare.⁴⁰

Back to the study.

Historian: This is all very thought-provoking, though for a start one might be a little wary of invoking Juvenal to explain the crisis of the late Republic. Of course it is impossible to avoid interpreting the ancient sources through our own prejudices and experiences, but surely there's a risk of over-doing it? The fact that we lack understanding of the grammar of urban life in Rome does not mean that its inhabitants had the same problem. A time traveller would doubtless experience the city as fragmented, incomprehensible and alienating, and would be quite incapable of producing a coherent account of it, but that doesn't mean we should elevate such a reaction to a principle of urban life.

View of Rome from the perspective of a pigeon flying just above the rooftops, sudden swerves to avoid taller buildings included.

Voice 15: It is this city who first proved that oratory cannot reach every goal. About her not only is it impossible to speak properly, but it is impossible even to see her properly.⁴¹

Even from a greater height, Rome still fills the screen.

Voice 15: For beholding so many hills occupied by buildings, or on plains so many meadows completely urbanised, or so much land brought under the name of one city, who could survey her accurately, and from what point of observation?

*The vast urban sprawl continues to dominate the view as the credits roll.*⁴²

⁴⁰ Raban (1974) 10

⁴¹ Aelius Aristides *Or.* 26.6

⁴² Particular thanks to David Noy and Andrew Skingsley, for their work in collecting and analysing evidence relating to migrants and beggars respectively, and to my family.

* * * * *

From the cutting-room floor: back in the study.

Historian: Which proves nothing. Aristides is a foreign visitor, he's in more or less the same boat as us, *and* he's looking to flatter his audience, not offer a serious study of urban alienation. The obvious problem with this style of presentation is that the sources lack all context; which is, I suppose, deliberate, as any editorial commentary on their reliability would simply reinstate the quasi-objective voice of the historian as the sole source of authority.⁴³

Voice 14 (off camera): The city as we imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate in maps and statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture.⁴⁴

Historian: Agreed, the task of the historian is to offer both perspectives, the critical analysis and the imaginative reconstruction, and agreed, this is a matter of presentation as much as substance.⁴⁵ The gods'-eye view of urban life is all too familiar, as is historians' reliance on the literary techniques of nineteenth-century realist fiction.⁴⁶ What alternatives are there? We can offer a perspective that is explicitly individual and situated, though we soon run up against the limits of the evidence and the problem of how much we are entitled to make use of imaginative hypotheses — that is, making things up. Besides, it must be admitted that the professional writers of fiction are more often than not rather better than your average historian at such things as characterisation and dialogue. Our reconstructions can only pale in comparison, even if ultimately their versions succeed by assimilating Rome to something more familiar — the conventions of *film noir* with added togas.⁴⁷ I suppose that the documentary form works as well as anything else in evoking fragmentation and confusion, which, even if they were not endemic to life in ancient Rome, certainly characterise our knowledge of it. Are we done now?

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⁴³ Cf. Berkhofer (1995) 170-201.

⁴⁴ Raban (1974) 9.

⁴⁵ Hopkins (1999) 2.

⁴⁶ White (1978) 42-6.

⁴⁷ E.g. Davis (1989), (1990)

Drefach-Velindre,
Llandysul,
Carmarthenshire.

7th October 2000

Dear Catharine and Greg,

Herewith the unfortunate consequence of reading *A World Full of Gods* after eating too much cheese (I have recently reduced my consumption of dairy products on the advice of my acupuncturist; she had nothing to say about my choice of reading material). Somehow I doubt that this is what you're looking for.

One of the contexts of this piece is David Noy's recent book on foreigners in Rome, which does such a thorough job of collecting and discussing sensibly all the available evidence. This left me with little more than a few rather vague ideas about the cultural consequences of mass migration, which are not, I suspect, capable of being substantiated in any traditional manner. I have resorted instead to a mixture of assertion and suggestion to promote one reading (not to say imaginative extrapolation) of the sources, while also exploring some of the possibilities and implications of an alternative form of historical discourse — not least the opportunity to point out the more obvious flaws in the argument before anyone else does.

I trust you realise that any editorial comments will simply be appended to the article. Come to think of it, this letter should probably be incorporated somewhere as well . . .

Love,

Neville

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