

# Introduction: Views on the Mediterranean

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## Abstract

This brief article introduces the theme of this issue as well as the contents of the individual contributions it contains. The issue brings together the topic of travel and movement in the ancient eastern Mediterranean and the Mediterranean as a category of research. Furthermore, it highlights a range of visual matters with a focus on visionary experiences and the motif of seeing. More specifically, the studies included in the issue concentrate on such themes as eyewitnessing, visits to religious and other sites, engagement with material objects, and the practise of imagination in visualization. In so doing, the present issue offers diverse perspectives on the intersections of movement and visibility in late antiquity, including in ancient Jewish, early Christian, and 'pagan' contexts.

**Keywords:** eyewitness, travel, movement, Mediterranean, migration, globalisation

'Unless I see (...), I will never believe', Thomas famously replied after his friends had told him about their encounter with the risen Jesus (John 20:25). An understanding that there is a close connection between seeing and truth was widespread across the ancient Mediterranean. In fact, seeing with one's own eyes was one of the most powerful truth warrants in the ancient world. Small wonder, therefore, that individuals with the time and means would often travel to distant places in order to check the accuracy of their knowledge by seeing for themselves. This link between journeying and eyewitnessing also served as a literary topos in ancient travel reports. As they describe the journeys of their protagonists, many of these writings draw particular attention to what the travellers saw on the road.

The contributions included in this issue all revolve around the themes of mobility and visionary experience in the ancient Mediterranean milieu. They address a wide variety of cultures and traditions, ranging from the cult of Italian migrants in Greece to the travel account in the ancient Jewish Letter of Aristeas to the early Christian networks in Corinth and beyond. In so doing, the present issue brings together two thriving yet fairly recent areas of study: travel in the ancient world and the Mediterranean as a category of research.

## Recent trends in travel research

In the past two decades, travel and movement have increasingly been at the forefront of academic debates in various disciplines exploring the human past, including classics, ancient history, biblical studies, and archaeology. Overall, this trend in research has resulted in a more dynamic understanding of the ancient Mediterranean world, whether the question is about the movement of people, objects, ideas, or practices.

Up until now, some attention has been paid to travel and movement in the ancient Near East or in the classical Greek world.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the recent upsurge of research on ancient mobility has specifically tended to focus on the evidence of the Roman Empire. As Lionel Casson already demonstrated in his classic *Travel in the Ancient World*,<sup>2</sup> the Romans built roads that connected the far ends of their empire and liberated the Mediterranean from the pirates who had terrorised the area by claiming control of it. As a result of these efforts, travel and mobility greatly increased in the Roman world, and its inhabitants were often on the move.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the material conditions of travel, scholars have examined the symbolic value and the effects of travel in the ancient Mediterranean context. A key insight developed in these studies is that travel opens up the

1 See e.g. C. Adams, J. Roy (ed.), *Travel, Geography and Culture in Ancient Greece, Egypt and the Near East*, Oxford 2007; I. Malkin, *A Small Greek World: Networks in the Ancient Mediterranean*, Oxford 2011.

2 L. Casson, *Travel in the Ancient World*, London 1974.

3 See e.g. J.-M. André, M.-F. Baslez, *Voyager dans l'antiquité*, Paris 1993; C. Adams, R. Laurence (ed.), *Travel and Geography in the Roman Empire*, London 2001; J. Elsner, I. Rutherford (ed.), *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman & Early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods*, Oxford 2005; M. Pretzler, *Pausanias: Travel Writing in Ancient Greece*, London 2007; M.R. Niehoff (ed.), *Journeys in the Roman East: Imagined and Real* (Culture, Religion, and Politics in the Greco-Roman World 1), Tübingen 2017.

mind. In her book *Wandering in Ancient Greek Culture*,<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Montiglio shows that both the wise and the mad feature as wanderers: whereas wise persons know how to integrate their varied experiences on the road into a more complete understanding of knowledge, the mad lose themselves on the way. Related to the symbolism of travel are its effects. Employing theories developed with a view to the modern world, such as network theories or theories of globalisation, scholars have demonstrated that the increase of movement in the Roman world enabled the acquisition of knowledge of other cultures.<sup>5</sup> Travel also prompted novel, intricate reflections on one's own culture, thus resulting in what can be called 'global mélanges', in which local and global concerns and perspectives intertwine.<sup>6</sup>

Recent scholarship on ancient travel exhibits a tendency to distinguish between different kinds of travel, including both voluntary and involuntary types of mobility, or temporary and permanent relocations. Individuals journeyed for multiple reasons and under vastly different conditions, and these variegated goals of and reasons for travel naturally had an impact on how they experienced and understood their journeys. One kind of travel that has received particular attention by ancient historians, archaeologists, and biblical scholars alike is migration.<sup>7</sup> The Roman world, from

4 S. Montiglio, *Wandering in Ancient Greek Culture*, Chicago 2005.

5 See e.g. I. Malkin, C. Constantakopoulou, K. Panagopoulou (ed.), *Greek and Roman Networks in the Mediterranean*, London 2009.

6 See e.g. M. Pitts, M. J. Versluys (ed.), *Globalisation and the Roman World: World History, Connectivity, and Material Culture*, Cambridge 2015; on global mélanges see also P.B. Hartog, 'Where Shall Wisdom be Found? Identity, Sacred Space, and Universal Knowledge in Philostratus and the Acts of the Apostles', in P.B. Hartog, S. Laderman, V. Tohar, A.L.H.M. van Wieringen (ed.), *Jerusalem and Other Holy Places as Foci of Multireligious and Ideological Confrontation*, Leiden 2020, 131-49.

7 See also Lindsey Mazurek's contribution to this issue: 'Materialising Migration: Towards a Theory of Integration in Isiac Cults', in 'Views on the Mediterranean', ed. P.B. Hartog, E. Uusimäki, special issue, *Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* (2021), 177-94. On migration in biblical literature see e.g. M.J. Boda, F.R. Ames, J. Ahn, M. Leuchter (ed.), *The Prophets Speak on Forced Migration*, Atlanta 2015; T.S. Hadjiev (ed.), *Migration, Foreignness and the Hebrew Bible, Biblical Interpretation* 26 (2018); C.A. Strine, 'Your Name Shall No Longer Be Jacob, but Refugee: Insights into Gen 25:19-33:20 from Involuntary Migration Studies', in C. Strine, T. Klutz, J. Keady (ed.), *Scripture in Social Discourse: Social Scientific Perspectives on Early Jewish and Christian Writings*, London 2018, 51-69; P. Pitkänen, *Migration and Colonialism in Late Second Millennium BCE Levant and Its Environs: The Making of a New World*, London 2019. On Roman migration see e.g. L. de Ligt, L.E. Tacoma (ed.), *Migration and Mobility in the Early Roman Empire*, Leiden 2016; E. Lo Cascio, L.E. Tacoma, with the assistance of Miriam J. Groen-Vallinga (ed.), *The Impact of Mobility and Migration in the Roman Empire*, Leiden 2016.

this viewpoint, appears as a world of migrants, in which Jews, Christians, Greeks, and others all participated and interacted.

A related development in scholarship is the rise of the Mediterranean as a category of research. Starting with Fernand Braudel's *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*,<sup>8</sup> scholars have increasingly come to consider the Mediterranean as an intercultural, if not globalised, space whose particular features are determined by the sea after which it is named.

This distinctly Mediterranean approach has found an influential application in Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell's *The Corrupting Sea*.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the notion of the Mediterranean as a shared space has not gone unchallenged. One obvious challenge is the very definition of 'the Mediterranean'. Would Mesopotamia, for instance, be included in it? This is not the place to engage these long-standing debates, valuable though they are.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, we argue that the category of 'the Mediterranean' remains useful for the study of ancient Judaism and early Christianity insofar as it challenges scholars working in those fields to contextualise the objects of their investigations and the results of their research within a wider, intrinsically varied cultural context.<sup>11</sup> The articles included in this issue present the variety of writings and material objects that they treat in a way that takes up this challenge. In so doing, they offer new impetuses to think of travel and eyewitnessing within a Mediterranean context.

Finally, the thematic issue highlights a number of visual matters related to movement, specifically focusing on the function of seeing, whether the

8 F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, Paris 1949.

9 P. Horden, N. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*, Oxford 2000.

10 On these debates see e.g. W.V. Harris (ed.), *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, Oxford 2005; I. Malkin, *Mediterranean Paradigms and Classical Antiquity*, London 2005; D. Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean*, London 2011; C. Broodbank, *The Making of the Middle Sea: A History of the Mediterranean from the Beginning to the Emergence of the Classical World*, Oxford 2013; C. Concannon, L.A. Mazurek (ed.), *Across the Corrupting Sea: Post-Braudelian Approaches to the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean*, London 2016.

11 See esp. S. Schwartz, *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society? Reciprocity and Solidarity in Ancient Judaism*, Princeton 2010; M. R. Niehoff, 'Wie wird man ein Mediterraner Denker? Der Fall Philon von Alexandria', in R. Faber, A. Lichtenberger (ed.), *Ein pluriverses Universum: Zivilisationen und Religionen im antiken Mittelmeerraum* (Mittelmeerstudien 7), Paderborn 2015, 355-67; Concannon, Mazurek (ed.), *Across the Corrupting Sea*; D. Mizzi, 'From the Judean Desert to the Great Sea: Qumran in a Mediterranean Context', *Dead Sea Discoveries* 24 (2017), 378-406.

question is about a literary motif or engagement with material culture. In so doing, the issue adds to the ongoing conversation on space and imagination in late antique studies. The recent volume *Seeing the God* is pioneering in this respect, as the book explores a number of intersections between visual culture and religious experience across traditions in the ancient Mediterranean.<sup>12</sup> Another landmark study in this respect is Jane Heath's book *Paul's Visual Piety*, which brought visual interest in the forefront of Pauline and more broadly early Christian scholarship, which had long neglected the role of the visual.<sup>13</sup>

### The content of this issue

The present theme issue offers a series of articles that illustrate visual aspects of travel and human mobility in the ancient Mediterranean. More specifically, the focus is on the eastern part of the Mediterranean world, ranging from Egypt to Palestine to Greece, whilst the temporal range of the studies extends from the second century BCE to the late antique and early medieval periods.

Benjamin G. Wright examines the Letter of Aristeas, a Jewish text written in Greek, with a particular focus on its travelogue. Wright explores how Aristeas's travelogue adds to the construction of a Jewish identity in Alexandria in the second century BCE. While the author is Jewish, the fictional narrator of the text is not a Jew, which means that his reports are channeled through the voice of an 'outsider'. The selected approach of the author implies an ambiguous situation according to Wright. Educated Jews like him clearly took part in the social life of the Hellenistic world of Alexandria. Yet, both the writer of the Letter of Aristeas and his audience seem to have experienced some anxiety regarding the construction and/or maintenance of a Jewish identity in that cultural milieu. As argued by Wright, the distinct emphasis of the non-Jewish narrator on how he saw a set of things and events in Jerusalem serves a specific purpose: it functions as a means to encourage the audience to believe that they are connected to the city, the central polis of the Jews/Judaeans.

12 M. Arnhold, H.O. Maier, J. Rüpke (ed.), *Seeing the God: Image, Space, Performance, and Vision in the Religion of the Roman Empire* (Culture, Religion, and Politics in the Greco-Roman World 2), Tübingen 2018.

13 J.M.F. Heath, *Paul's Visual Piety: The Metamorphosis of the Beholder*, Oxford 2013.

Lindsey Mazurek analyses Italian migrants in Greece in the second and first centuries BCE, specifically examining the material culture – the epigraphic evidence in particular – for the Egyptian cults at Delos and Thessaloniki. Italians, Mazurek argues, actively introduced new structures and objects that served their integration into local Greek communities, both social and religious. A scope of different integration strategies can be observed, including dedications to be seen and read in sanctuaries (Delos) and new structures and objects to be used in the ritual worship of Osiris (Thessaloniki). Meanwhile, Italians aimed at preserving their membership in Italian communities, which demonstrates that the process of integration did not erase existing cultural identities. The outcome of integration is not a homogenous community, but a complex situation in which identification with more dominant Greek communities appears as situational.

Pieter B. Hartog turns to the New Testament, analysing eyewitness testimony (autopsy) as a literary motif in Luke and Acts. In both writings, Hartog shows, eyewitnessing features as the most reliable source of knowledge and serves to support the trustworthiness of the texts' content. The prologue to and the final episode of Luke even constitute an *inclusio* that stresses the key role of autopsy in the transmission of knowledge concerning Jesus's life and work. The book of Acts shares the same conception of autopsy as a means to access knowledge and includes Paul in the ranks of eyewitnesses to Jesus's deeds. Furthermore, Acts, like other travel narratives, emphasises visibility through a combination of spatial description and autopsy language. This combination, in Hartog's view, serves to erect memory spaces – that is, literary memories of spaces that are of central importance to the Jesus movement – such as David's tomb, the Areopagus, and the city of Rome. These memory spaces invite the audience of Acts to adopt the apostles' gaze.

Cavan Concannon explores the Christian collective in Corinth, a vital hub of early Christianity, in the second century CE from the viewpoint of networks. The remaining evidence shows that the Corinthians hosted travelling Christians, copied texts, and engaged in ecclesial politics. As is demonstrated by Dionysios's letter collection, Corinth can be characterised as a key node in a set of early Christian networks that stretched from Rome to Crete to the Black Sea. This was the outcome of the work of many anonymous agents and the expenditure of much social and monetary capital. Networks are not stable, however, but tenuous and fragile phenomena that both grow and decompose; this means, as observed by Concannon, that networks require constant maintenance in order to succeed. As in the case of many other networks, the networks in Corinth did not survive, but they

had virtually ceased to exist by the time of Tertullian and Origen in the late second and third centuries CE.

Susanne Luther explores descriptions of landscape in both factual and fictional literature from Graeco-Roman antiquity, specifically analysing the creation of visual experience through vivid description known as 'ekphrasis'. Luther argues that the readers of such textual accounts become eyewitnesses to the scenes described, eventually being persuaded to accept the perspective of the author, which demonstrates the function of ekphrastic visualization as a powerful rhetorical strategy and a valuable pedagogical tool. In the end of her article, Luther reflects on the evidence of the New Testament for the use of landscape description, thus mapping out intersections between early Christian and other contemporary literature.

Jessica van 't Westeinde continues to explore the late antique world of early Christians, examining the topic of travel and perception in the writing of Jerome. She identifies the travelogue of Paula's journey from Rome to Bethlehem as the foundational source for exploring Jerome's perception of the Mediterranean in general and of the Holy Land in particular. Van 't Westeinde argues that Jerome drew on a wide range of sources – including Greek, Roman, and Jewish ones – in his descriptions of the sites. Jerome, however, does not only describe these places. As argued by van 't Westeinde, he ultimately transforms perceptions of them by imbuing the sites with Christian meaning.

In addition to the aforementioned research articles, the thematic issue contains a 'keytext' contribution on a major publication related to the topic of this issue. In this article, Pieter B. Hartog and Lieve Teugels discuss Catherine Hezser's landmark study *Jewish Travel in Antiquity*, which was published in 2011. As Hartog and Teugels show, Hezser's book has been groundbreaking in placing Jewish travel on the scholarly agenda and challenging the earlier view of the largely sedentary character of Judaism in the first five centuries CE.

Bringing together ancient historians, biblical scholars, and archaeologists, the articles included in the present issue seek to inspire further cross-disciplinary investigation of travel, mobility, and visibility – experiences so central to human life, both in antiquity and today.

## About the authors



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