

out for a Creationist explanation".¹¹ Whether there is a credible alternative explanation will be the subject of the final article in this series.

(To be concluded)

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11. E. Bates, D. Thal & V. Marchman, "'Symbols and syntax': A Darwinian approach to language development", in N. A. Krasnegor *et al.*, *Biological and Behavioural Determinants of Language Development*, Hillsdale (N. J.), 1991, p. 31, quoted by Steven Pinker, *op. cit.*, p. 366.

Paul's epic journey to Rome

5. Changing ships at Myra

Tom Barling

Paul and his companions have reached the important port of Myra, where they join a grain ship going to Rome. We pause to consider what these magnificent ships were like.

THE CALL AT MYRA of the coaster on which Paul and Luke were travelling from Caesarea to Rome has much interest. First, there is the remarkable fact that the next stage of their voyage was to be on a grain carrier bound from the great Egyptian port of Alexandria for Puteoli. We have observed in the previous article that this appears to be a strange place for a ship travelling west to be tied up ([Apr. p. 134](#)), yet there was nothing untoward about this as the progress of a sailing vessel was determined in large degree by the wind. These grain carriers were by far the largest vessels then afloat, and it is a subject to which we shall progressively return.

The city of Myra

For the moment we focus on the port of Myra. The town itself was located a short distance from the coast, and this appears to be no accident. If a town possessed an acropolis, as Myra did, any invasion from the sea could be observed, and appropriate action taken, thus obviating any advantage an invader might have. This fact, together with other useful information, emerges clearly in an article on the city by E. M. Yamauchi: "The city of Myra was located on the plateau about 3.5 miles from the coast . . . but its name also included its port of Andriace (now Andraki). The Myrus or Andracus River flowed past the city to the coast in a narrow valley. Its estuary is now submerged in sand dunes. The ruins of the city of Myra are now located 1 mile north of the village of Demre".¹ Thus, as we can see, it was this situation on a plateau that gave it a commanding view over the coast.

Freya Stark, in the account of her visit to Myra in *The Lycian Shore*, mentions how, with the passage of time and the neglect of the estuary, it became silted up. This is a familiar feature of Mediterranean harbours. The mighty Nile has the most famous delta of all; Ephesus, so famous in its day, is now some miles from the place where the Cayster river empties its waters into the Aegean. The silt deposited can prove very fertile; in the case of Myra, Freya Stark reports that the river, with "eighteen feet of soil . . . has left little of the more inland Roman town standing except ends of columns among *agnus castus* and roots of asphodel".² However, in its heyday, to quote Stark once more, "Its importance grew under the Empire; it became, with Patara, the chief port of Lycia; and the theatre, which held about eleven thousand spectators, still expresses, alone in the harvested stubble, a crowded but provincial prosperity".³ Information kindly provided by the Turkish Tourist Agency, besides dwelling on the importance of Myra in the past, furnishes this information: "Demre [the modern name of Myra], quite apart from being a tourism centre, is also an agricultural region. Greenhouses are widely used and many varieties of vegetables are grown", the latter detail being in itself evidence of the fertility of the soil.⁴

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1. See *"The Anchor Bible Dictionary"*, Doubleday, 1992, vol. 4, pp. 939-40.
 2. Freya Stark, *The Lycian Shore*, John Murray, London, 1956, p. 152.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
 4. Associated with Myra is Nicholas, a saint of the church of the fourth century. In the handbook supplied by the Turkish Tourist Agency we are told he is the traditional Father Christmas, Santa Claus; he helped poor and orphaned children and died on 6 December, A.D. 343.

A measure of the importance of Myra to the Roman economy is the fact that later the much-travelled Emperor Hadrian (A.D. 117-138) constructed, in A.D. 131, here and in Patara, large granaries. Patara was situated further to the west, and we recall it was a port where Paul and Luke, together with other ecclesial representatives, put in on their way to Jerusalem (Acts 21:1).

A grain ship bound for Italy

It was, then, at Myra that the centurion Julius found a ship from Alexandria bound for Italy, and it was on this grain freighter they were to travel until they were shipwrecked on Malta. We hope to learn more and more about these vessels as we continue our study of Luke's record. Later we shall learn that the boat was carrying 276 persons (27:37). Presumably most of these were already passengers who had embarked at Alexandria. But there was evidently room for further passengers, and some may have joined the vessel at Myra apart from the group Julius put on board, since the town played so important a role in the Roman grain trade.

If we are surprised that the grain carrier could accommodate so many passengers apart from its cargo, there is independent witness as to how many these vessels could carry. The source commonly quoted in this connection is Josephus, who in his *Life* records a journey to Rome. His account merits more notice than it commonly receives, for it possesses many details bearing upon Luke's record in Acts.

It relates to a journey made by Josephus to Rome while Felix was governor in Judea. We recall first that Paul appeared before this corrupt individual, who endeavoured to extract a bribe from the apostle (24:26). Felix was procurator between A.D. 52 and A.D. 59 or 60 (this uncertainty is of little consequence for our present purposes). What is germane is that it lies in the very period when, shortly after, during the governorship of Festus (the successor of Felix), Paul set out for Rome. These facts are clearly of great interest. Josephus, then in his twenty-sixth year, was travelling in the company of a number of priests whom Felix had put in bonds and who were being sent "to plead their cause before Caesar". It is surely impossible to miss the interest of this piece of incidental information.

Furthermore, when the boat was in the Adriatic it suffered shipwreck. We remember Paul's ship also drifted through the same sea (27:27). Then there is the all-important detail that the hapless



**Statue of St Nicholas at Demre,
ancient Myra.**

(Picture: John Ramsden)

vessel conveying Josephus had about 600 on board, a detail revealing the capacity of these carriers. Furthermore, we are told that he was among eighty survivors who, having swum all night, presumably clinging to floating objects, were picked up by another vessel, eventually reaching Puteoli, where Luke and Paul also arrived (28:13). This particular experience reminds us of what befell Paul after one of the shipwrecks in which he was involved (*cf.* 2 Cor. 11:25).⁵ The various details provided by Josephus seem to suggest the conclusion that the boat had been specially chartered, but even so she may also have been carrying some cargo.

5. For the Josephus passage see *The Life of Flavius Josephus*, 3 (p. 2 in Whiston's translation).

Boarding the ship

So it was that Julius put Paul and the other members of the party on one of the Alexandrian ships so vital to the life and economy of the empire. We wonder whether Paul, with his unique knowledge of the Old Testament, would reflect on the fact that, centuries before, his ancestor Benjamin, together with the other members of Jacob's family, in a time of famine in Canaan had gone down to Egypt because Joseph had been able to lay up corn "as the sand of the sea" (Gen. 41:49), a witness surely to the fertilising properties of the Nile waters.

As for the other passengers on the ship on which Paul and Luke were embarked at Myra, one would like to learn more about them. They would obviously form the majority of the passengers, and their very number was evidence of the links between Rome and this important part of its dominion. We hope later to engage in some speculation regarding this matter. We wonder also what fare was paid by passengers, but no source ever reports this practical matter. Probably it was a matter of negotiation between the man in charge of the vessel and those who wanted to embark. Later we shall discover other gaps affecting practical matters.

As for the grain carriers, we have precious information provided by Lucian concerning one particular vessel. He was an author of the second century A.D., but his account of the totally unexpected arrival of a great ship from Alexandria in the Piraeus, the port for Athens, is of the greatest interest. Inevitably, all authors writing about the maritime activity of the Roman Empire turn to Lucian's account of a large vessel which arrived in the Piraeus. This vessel, after leaving Alexandria initially for Myra, was overtaken by a westerly gale which drove it to Sidon. Ten days after leaving Sidon it was overtaken by a storm, but finally made the Lycian coast. Eventually, seventy days after departing from Alexandria, the ship made the Piraeus. Lucian provides these details in his dialogue *The Ship*.

The news of the totally unexpected arrival of such a vessel soon reached Athens itself and attracted crowds of curious sightseers. Amongst

these were Lucian and his three friends. We turn to Holland Rose, one-time Professor of Naval History at Cambridge University, for an account of the incident. Lucian and the others

"go on board and talk with the captain and the ship's carpenter. They then describe the ship: 'we stood long (said one of them) staring about by the main mast, to count the number of hides of which the sails were composed, and admiring that sailor, how he climbed up the shrouds, and in perfect security ran to and fro along the yards aloft, clinging fast to the tackling on both sides of the mast.' Then another of them chimes in: 'What an astonishing ship it is: 120 ells (an ell is 45 inches) in length, as the carpenter told us: more than 30 ells in breadth; and from the deck to the bottom of the hold, where the pump stands, 29 ells. And what a wonderful mast! What a mighty yard it carries, and what ropes support it! They then note its sign, the golden goose over the stern, its decorations, anchors, capstans and windlasses; also the cabins, the veritable army of sailors; and, for cargo, enough corn to feed Attica for a whole year. But the supreme wonder is that a little old man can steer this mighty mass with a slender pole fixed in the rudders".⁶

This fascinating description is usually accepted without reservation. However, Professor Rose is not so sure: "Lucian's picture is clearly overdrawn, and he may not have recorded the ship's measurements correctly" (p. 171). Then he goes on to say that Lucian, in view of his Greek readership, would be careful not to make any bad mistakes. At this distance of time we must be grateful for the details furnished by Lucian. The mention of the cabins aft of the ship is a detail easily overlooked. As the great grain ships occasionally carried distinguished persons, their comfort would be cared for in this area of the boat.

(To be continued)

6. See *The Mediterranean in the Ancient World*, Cambridge University Press, 1933, pp. 169-71.

Myra . . . was the seat of the sailors' god, to whom they offered their prayers before starting on the direct long course, and paid their vows on their safe arrival; this god survived in the Christianised form, St Nicholas of Myra, the patron-saint of sailors.

W. Ramsey, *St Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, p. 298.