Beware of Bandits!
Banditry and Land Travel in the Roman Empire

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Abstract

This paper considers the perils of travel by focusing on banditry, a conspicuous, yet oft-neglected, feature of the Roman Empire. Appearing at different times and at various locations it was thoroughly entrenched in Roman society and affected both the rich and poor alike. But the primary victim of banditry and the one to whom it posed the greatest threat was the ancient traveller since brigands tended to operate mostly along roads and rural highways in search of prey. The very real danger brigands posed to the ancient traveller can be detected from a number of diverse sources including tombstones on which was inscribed 'killed by bandits'. While the government took some measures to curb and even stamp out banditry, given the administrative and policing handicaps inherent in the Empire it remained fairly widespread.

Keywords: Travel, banditry, Roman Empire

Apuleius' Latin classic, the *Metamorphoses*, written in the second century C.E. describes the adventures of a wealthy young man named Lucius after he had been transformed into an ass. The story begins when Lucius, who had been travelling through Thessaly on business, stops to lodge in the town of Hypata because of the reputation of its female

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inhabitants who were allegedly skilled in magical arts. While lodging at the home of one Milo, Lucius learned from the slave girl that Milo's wife was an accomplished witch who was able to transform herself into an owl by means of smearing herself with a magical ointment. To quench his insatiable curiosity, Lucius persuaded the slave girl to procure the ointment; however, she mistakenly took the wrong flask and instead of being turned into an owl he was reduced to the form of a lowly ass (although he maintained his human intellect and his powers of observation). Things went from bad to worse for Lucius because on the very night he experienced his metamorphosis a gang of bandits broke into Milo's home and abducted him, along with the rest of Milo's pack animals, before his transformation could be reversed.

Lucius' asinine adventure lasted for almost a year and took him all over the Roman provinces of Achaea and Macedonia in central and northern Greece before he was finally able to return to human form with the aid of the goddess Isis. The numerous quotidian experiences Lucius endured during his time as a beast of burden are told with much detail and form the core of Apuleius' story. But far from being mundane or pedantic, Lucius' many observations as seen through the eyes of a donkey are extremely informative as they disclose the everyday workings and realities of the world in which the novel was set. As a result, it is likely that the work unconsciously discloses a number of important features about ordinary life in a Roman province in the second century C.E. (Millar 1981).

Of the many insightful features that emerge about the lives of ordinary citizens, two that are prominent within the novel itself and are important for the purposes of this investigation have to do with the related issues of travel and banditry. First, owing to the dynamics of Lucius' many sub-adventures as a pack animal, he is forced to repeatedly haul cargo and consequently spends considerable time on the road. As a result, he reveals some very informative information about various aspects of ancient travel, particularly concerning the ordinary traveller: who was travelling and why, what were the common modes of transportation, what were people carrying, how road systems worked, and a host of other insightful yet seemingly mundane details. Second, Apuleius reveals that for the ordinary traveller the threat of banditry was ever present. Even before Lucius' fateful transformation, Aristomenes, a minor character in the

opening scene of the story, informs Lucius of the potential dangers bandits posed to the lone traveller (*Metamorphoses* 1.7, 15, 23). Likewise, it is a group of mountain-dwelling bandits who plundered along the Thessalian highways and villages that serve as the catalyst for Lucius' entire adventure (*Metamorphoses* 3.28, 4.6–22). Furthermore, during Lucius' time as an ass, the dangers bandits posed to travellers are always on the horizon (*Metamorphoses* 7.4, 12, 13, 8.15). In one humorous episode parodying this fear, Lucius describes how his travelling company clashed with a roadside village one night because both groups mistakenly thought that the other was a gang of bandits who had come to steal their possessions (*Metamorphoses* 8.17–18). Although the incident has a strong comic element, it may nevertheless reveal the kinds of anxieties and hypersensitivities many an ancient traveller experienced due to bandits.

This paper will consider the perils of ancient land travel by examining banditry, a conspicuous, yet neglected aspect of rural society in the Roman Empire. Not only is Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* helpful in revealing the extent of banditry and the very real threat it posed to the ancient traveller, but a number of other sources also show how bandits greatly affected ancient land travel in general. This investigation will proceed by examining three related issues. First, it will commence by laying out a working definition of a 'bandit' given that in the ancient context the term was quite fluid and could be used rather loosely to describe a number of different phenomena. Second, this investigation will elucidate the specific perils banditry posed to the ancient traveller. Third, it will look at the various precautions travellers could take to avoid falling prey to bandits and what steps the government took to combat banditry to ensure that the roads were safe.

In order to conduct this investigation it will be necessary to take a fairly broad approach to the subject matter due to the nature of the source material. The evidence for ancient banditry, specifically of its effect on ancient travel, is diverse and comes from various parts of the Empire and from different time periods. Consequently, this analysis will be forced to draw on a wide geographical and even temporal database to elucidate the effects of banditry on ancient land travel. While there are inherent difficulties with this approach given its broad scope, it is nevertheless hoped that this examination will be able to provide an assessment that is

not anachronistic and is sufficiently nuanced so as to accurately present such geographically diverse data.

Ancient Banditry

A survey of the literature from the Roman Empire reveals the extent to which banditry was entrenched within society as references to 'bandits' (Lat. *latrones*/Grk. *lēstai*) and 'banditry' (*latrocinium*/*lēsteia*) can be found in the writings of historians, playwrights, orators, novelists, in the legal codes, and even in miscellaneous inscriptions and papyri.[2] From the available data it would appear that banditry was both ubiquitous and endemic as it appeared at different times and in varying locations throughout the Empire and affected both the rich and poor alike. While banditry was actively suppressed under Augustus and was rare in the first century with the exception of a few notable locations (Judea and Cilicia), it gradually increased in the second century until it grew virtually out of control in the later Empire (MacMullen 1966: 259–260).

Despite the frequency with which the terms 'bandits' and 'banditry' appear in ancient literature, it is with some difficulty that a precise meaning for the words can be established since there was no uniformity with the way in which they were used. For example, people who were part of urban gangs or who participated in urban street crime were commonly referred to as 'bandits', and Pirates who roamed on the open seas were commonly described as practising 'banditry'.[3] Those who acted in violent opposition to the state and whom we might regard as 'revolutionaries' proper, were often branded as 'bandits' (Josephus, *Bellum judaicum* 2.254, 275; cf. 2.425). Even in political discourse when one wished to malign their opponents or enemies they would employ the term 'bandit' to describe them.[4] Thus Cicero repeatedly accuses his political enemies of being 'bandits' even though there is no direct evidence that any of them ever participated in the sorts of activities bandits would have engaged in (Habinek 2001: 69–87). Also, as Brent Shaw has noted, 'many full-scale conflicts that would otherwise have been accorded the epithet "war" even by the Roman state's own criteria … were labelled "banditry" for ideological reasons …' (Shaw 1984: 7–8).

Yet, despite the disparate usages of the terms, a prominent meaning can be detected. Ancient sources often invoked the terms 'bandits' and 'banditry' when they sought to describe a specific type of crime, mainly theft, which was committed by bands of armed men in the rural areas outside of the city walls (MacMullen 1966: 255; *TDNT* 4.257–258).[5] Samuel Brunk, in his studies on brigandage in twentieth-century Mexico, offers a concise definition of a bandit that aptly captures the essence of the kind of ancient banditry that will be examined in this investigation and will consequently serve as the working definition for this paper. According to Brunk a bandit is, 'someone who engages in property theft as part of a group. This theft is sometimes combined with violence against the owners of that property and is generally associated with rural rather than urban areas, and with direct confrontation rather than stealth' (Brunk 1963: 334). Only one further addition needs to be appended to Brunk's definition for the purposes of this paper – that in the rural areas outside of the city walls banditry occurred most often along the roads and highways, as opposed to in the towns and villages.

Gangs of bandits operated mostly in the countryside or on the frontiers of the Empire where there was little government opposition or where local magistrates were responsible for policing (Strabo, *Geographica* 16.2.18–20; Josephus, *Bellum judaicum* 1.304–14; Sherwin-White 1963: 43, 98).[6] The reasons bandits preferred these types of regions are manifold. Such areas gave them the freedom to roam relatively unmolested in search of prey along highways and roads where pre-industrial travel was generally slow and cumbersome, and also the opportunity to quickly disperse and hide from serious threats (Isaac 1990: 78). The ideal location for a gang of bandits was one where they could operate in a complex local situation, and where a few miles might put them beyond the reach of one authority and under the jurisdiction of a new one (Kloppenborg-Verbin 2000: 250).

While it is somewhat difficult to characterise the types of men who became engaged in banditry, from the available evidence it would appear that most men who became bandits came from the lower echelons of society. Returning to Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, when Lucius had been abducted and stolen away to the mountainous hideout of his bandit abductors, he recalls hearing one of them inform a female hostage that he

had turned to banditry since his previous life was one of severe poverty (*Metamorphoses* 4.23). Likewise Bulla Felix, a well known bandit who plundered throughout Italy at the beginning of the third century C.E. was reported to have written to the Emperor Septimius Severus to inform him that if he truly desired to curb banditry he needed to adequately care for the slaves and the poor (Dio Cassius 77.10.5; cf. Scriptores Historiae Augustae, *Severus* 18.6).

Closely related to those who engaged in banditry because of a previous life of poverty were those who resorted to banditry out of sheer necessity. These men were drawn from the ranks of disenfranchised farmers, peasants, tenant labourers or itinerants who were constantly on the brink of destitution and who were only one crop failure away from extinction. Thus it is no surprise that whenever there was a poor agricultural year Josephus claimed that this often resulted in 'a harvest of banditry' (*Antiquitates judaicae*. 18.274; cf. Josephus, *Bellum judaicum* 2.184–203). In such circumstances, brigandage may have provided the only means whereby these lower classes could sustain themselves. But famine was not the only circumstance that gave rise to increased brigandage; economic instability, social distress, and general societal breakdown resulting from civil wars or rebellion were also contributing factors:

> Ever since war had been carried on continuously in many different places at once, and many cities had been overthrown, while sentences hung over the heads of all the fugitives, and there was no freedom from fear for anyone anywhere, large numbers had turned to banditry. (Dio Cassius 36.20.2)[7]

Yet, while some may have engaged in the trade as a last resort, others appear to have become bandits for purely economic reasons as it had the potential to become an extremely lucrative occupation (Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 7.4; Josephus, *Vita*. 70–76).

In addition to men from the lower rungs of society, outlaws, criminals, or even those evading debt or slavery, were also attracted to banditry as it provided a livelihood for them within the confines of the Empire. Likewise, it was also not unheard of for unemployed or ex-soldiers to become bandits as their skills complemented the trade (Dio Cassius

75.2.5–6; Scriptores Historiae Augustae, *Commodus*. 16.2; Herodian 1.10). They might form their own gangs or join pre-existing ones if they desired to supplement their income or if they received insufficient tracts of land following their tour of duty. However, they might move in and out of the trade depending if they rejoined or were released from active military service (Dyson 1975: 138–175).[8] For these types of men, the only difference between those that would have been bandits and those that actually were bandits was that the former lived in regions closer to power and therefore tended to work as retainers, soldiers, guards or enforcers (Kloppenborg-Verbin 200: 249–250).

Banditry and Ancient Land-Travel

Unlike the Emperor, or even certain other government administrators or members of elite *groups,* who could afford to travel with a large retinue of armed guards and a host of other attendants, most travellers could not afford such luxuries and often had to travel alone or in small groups (Suetonius, *Nero* 30; Seneca, *Epistulae* 87.1–4; 123.7; Casson 1974: 78). Consequently, the dangers bandits posed to the ordinary traveller were greatly increased since they often lacked sufficient protection.[9] From a survey of the available material, bandits posed escalating dangers to the traveller that ranged from highway robbery, which was usually accompanied by violence, to abduction if the bandits felt that the abducted might fetch a reasonable ransom or could serve as a slave, or in a worst-case scenario to robbery accompanied by murder.[10]

At the most basic level bandits were a threat to travellers because they robbed them and resorted to violence to do so. In the parable of the Good Samaritan recorded in Luke 10: 25–37, Jesus concisely sets forth a story about a traveller who was robbed and assaulted by bandits as he journeyed from Jerusalem to Jericho to illustrate a point about neighbourliness: 'Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of bandits, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead." 'NRSV Luke 10: 30).[11] While the story was fictitious, it is likely that the parable drew on a common occurrence to which the audience of Jesus could have readily related.[12]

This is confirmed by two strikingly similar examples of bandit raids from the second and third centuries C.E. In the first, in ca. 171 C.E. two pig merchants were travelling along the road from Theadelphia in the Fayum (Egypt) where they had recently conducted business. While they made their way to the next town they were attacked, badly beaten, and robbed of a pig and some of their clothing by a group of armed men.[13] The second account, preserved in a third century C.E. papyrus, records how a certain Petesouchos, son of Pasis, was brutally beaten, robbed of his money and clothing, and left for dead by a group of bandits while he travelled on the road to Corphotoi in order to visit his sister.[14]

Though these three accounts describe the most common danger bandits posed to the traveller, robbery accompanied by violence, none of them disclose exactly why violence was employed to accomplish the crime. Was it due to resistance on the part of the victim, the nature of the attack, or the disposition of those perpetrating the crime? While bandits generally resorted to violence or even severe violence to accomplish their theft, sometimes little or no violence was employed (Galen, *De naturalibus facultatibus* 3.69).

Besides the obvious threat of robbery and bodily harm, bandits occasionally kidnapped their victims either to enslave them for themselves, or to hold them for ransom. In the *Metamorphoses* when Lucius arrived at the mountainous hideout of the bandits who had recently abducted him he relates that the bandits were keeping one abductee for ransom, while another, who had been captured sometime before, was acting as their slave (4.23). Likewise, Sulpitius Severus, in his hagiography of St. Martin of Tours, reports that St. Martin was abducted for some time by bandits when he made his way through the Alps in northern Italy (*Vita Sancti Martini* 5).[15] That bandits periodically abducted people in the course of their raids is also attested from an inscription from the Roman colony of Salona in the early third century C.E. that refers to a man who had been 'abducted by bandits' (*abducto a latronibus*) (*CIL* III 2544; cf. Scriptores Historiae Augustae, *Maximinus* 2.1).

The ultimate danger posed by bandits was to one's life, and there is considerable evidence that they periodically killed their victims in the course of their theft. A number of inscriptions reveal that deaths due to bandits were a frequent enough occurrence to give rise to the formulaic

expression *interfectus a latronibus* (killed by bandits), found on tombstones throughout the Empire.[16] In fact, for travellers to be killed by bandits was so commonplace that whenever people did not show up for a scheduled meeting and were missing it was assumed that bandits had murdered them (Lucian, *Alexander* 44).

Individual Actions to Avoid Perils of Bandits

Since ancient travellers were obviously aware of the potential danger bandits posed, many appear to have taken precautionary and pre-emptive measures. Apuleius reports that some choose to travel during the day and avoided night travel altogether when bandits tended to be on the prowl (*Metamorphoses* 1.15, 4.8–22, 8.15). The more prudent also opted to travel in groups, as there tended to be far greater safety from bandits in numbers.[17] Epictetus, while speaking in an extended metaphor on wealth, tyranny and sagacity, employed the example of a wise traveller who journeyed with a group to avoid falling prey to bandits:

> This is the way also with the more cautious among travellers. A man has heard that the road which he is taking is infested with bandits; he does not venture to set forth alone, but he waits for a company, either that of an ambassador, or of a quaestor, or of a proconsul, and when he has attached himself to them he travels along the road in safety. (*Diatribai* 4.1.91)

Not only does this brief reference confirm the greater security in numbers, but also yields another significant detail. Travellers may have periodically joined with or stayed nearby imperial convoys since they were generally well guarded and may have afforded the traveller extra protection.

Another precaution the ancient traveller took was to journey along major highways that were well travelled and populated. In a number of examples, bandit attacks are depicted as taking place when a traveller diverged from a main highway onto a lesser-travelled road or into a deserted area (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 7.70). Socrates, a minor character in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, was attacked by bandits and stripped of

everything when he decided to take a road that led him through a deserted valley (1.7), and St. Martin was attacked by a gang of bandits when he took a remote route through the Alps in northern Italy (Sulpitius Severus, *Vita Sancti Martini* 5). Likewise Lucian, in one of his imaginary dialogues, tells of a rich Athenian who was attacked and killed by bandits when travelling along a deserted road through a remote region:

> [He] was murdered by bandits, I think while travelling over Mount Cithaeron to Eleusis. He arrived groaning and holding his wound with both hands . . . He blamed himself for being rash: he crossed Mount Cithaeron and the district around Eleutherae, which was deserted by the wars, taking only two servants for the trip – a man who was carrying four cups and five bowls of solid gold. (*Dialogi mortuorum* 27.2)

While there were no guarantees that travelling along major highways and through populated areas ensured safety (Pliny, *Epistulae* 6.25), the perils of going on deserted roads seemed much greater.

Another measure a traveller could take to avoid falling prey to bandits was either to take nothing of value on their journey or to conceal their possessions since the sight of a valuable might prompt an attack (Lucian, *Dialogi mortuorum* 27.2). Seneca (the Younger) noted, 'only the poor man is safe from bandit attacks' (*Epistulae* 14.9), and Juvenal in his *Satires* echoes the same sentiment, 'the empty-handed traveller will whistle in the bandit's face' (10.20). In Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, when Aristomenes wished to set out from a certain city in the middle of the night and asked the night porter to open the city gates he was warned that it would be extremely dangerous since bandits were undoubtedly on the prowl. However, he quickly retorted that he had nothing to fear from bandits since he carried nothing of value and was in severe poverty (1.15).

For those travellers that had valuables it was best to keep them concealed under all circumstances. In an exchange of letters between a certain Paniskos and his wife Ploutogenia from late third-century C.E. Egypt, Paniskos asked Ploutogenia to come visit him and to bring along her clothes and jewellery, but warned his wife that she must not wear her jewellery on the trip.[18] Undoubtedly the fear of attracting unwanted attention, whether from bandits or others, was certainly on Paniskos' mind.

While certain people may have been able to travel without carrying anything of value or may have been able to conceal their valuables quite handily, for many, especially merchants and businessmen, this would have been impossible as their occupation necessitated that they bring their goods with them.[19] For those that were required to bring valuables or for those that could afford it, it was possible to hire armed guards for a journey. In the above-mentioned correspondence between Paniskos and his wife Ploutogenia, Paniskos informs his wife to come to him 'with good men,' which may be an indirect reference to bodyguards (Adams 2001: 149).[20]

For those who could not afford paid protection they could always resort to a form of self-help and arm themselves. When describing the Essenes Josephus specifically noted that they, 'carry nothing whatever with them on their journeys, except arms as a protection against bandits' (*Bellum judaicum* 2.125; cf. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 2.18). Galen, while discussing the merits of dissection, reported that he once inspected the corpse of a dead bandit lying on the side of the road who had been killed when he attacked an armed traveller:

> On one occasion we saw the skeleton of a bandit lying on rising ground by the roadside. Some traveller repelling his attack had killed him. None of the local inhabitants would bury him, but in their hatred of him were glad enough to see his body consumed by the birds which, in a couple of days, ate his flesh, leaving the skeleton as if for medical demonstration. (*Galen, De anatomias administrationibus* 1.2)

Beyond the practical measures one could take to avoid falling prey to bandits, ancient travellers also resorted to supernatural means. The more superstitious traveller might resort to augury, divination, or even dream interpretation to determine whether it was an auspicious time to travel and would proceed with or cancel their trip accordingly. Artemidorus' second-century C.E. *Oneirocritica* (Interpretation of Dreams) gives a detailed listing of various interpretations for dreams and included within his work were even signs for falling prey to bandits on the road. According to Artemidorus, if someone were to dream of quail immediately prior to a journey it meant that on the road one would almost certainly be ambushed by bandits (3.5). Likewise, if while making a

journey one should see an owl in a dream, 'it means that he will encounter either a great tempest or bandits' (Artemidorus 3.65). While it is doubtful that revering such omens was a very effective means of ensuring safe passage, many a traveller may have diligently watched for and heeded such portents considering them of great importance (Casson 1974: 178).

While the precautionary measures listed above may have helped to reduce the odds of falling prey to bandits on the road, there was no way that they could assure complete safety from them. Bandits were known to attack armed travellers, large groups of travellers and even imperial convoys as they went along major thoroughfares, and doubtless many travellers who journeyed at auspicious times and with good omens fell prey to bandits (Josephus, *Vita*. 126–27; 145–46; Josephus *Bellum judaicum*; cf. Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae* 20.113–17). When such raids occurred and when a traveller(s) encountered bandits, it seems that one of two options was most commonly resorted to, flight or fight.[21]

Government Actions Against Bandits

The different levels of government, whether imperial, provincial or local, took various measures to stamp out banditry and ensure safe travel on the roads and highways around the Empire.[22] One of the first attested measures the imperial government took to make the roads safe from bandits was the instalment and posting of a *statio*, a small detachment of *stationarii* or guards stationed at posts in the worst places along highways. Augustus initiated this practice by setting up roadside posts in Italy to put a stop to brigandage (Suetonius, *Divus Augusta* 32.1), and later Tiberius increased their numbers as banditry persisted (Suetonius, *Tiberius* 37.1). An inscription from a fort erected by Commodus in Numidia in the late second century C.E. reads, 'between two highways for the safety of travellers' and may refer to a post similar to the ones established under Augustus and Tiberius (*CIL* VIII 2495). In Egypt, there is also much evidence for a well-structured system of garrisoned posts and watchtowers along major highways and trade routes for the same purpose (Bagnall 1977; Bagnall 1982: 126–128).

The imperial government also resorted to confiscation of weapons as a way to reduce crime and likely had banditry in mind with such measures. Philo reports that when Tiberius confiscated the weapons of Egypt he took up an incredibly large haul, especially from the countryside (*In Flaccum* 92f). Later Claudius, after his conquest of Britain, enforced a partial disarming of its inhabitants (Tacitus, *Annales* 12.31). The purposes of such measures may have served as a partial attempt to demobilize and disarm bandits. However, the government generally permitted people to bear arms for self-defence and in some cases even encouraged them to do so in order to protect themselves from bandits (Zosimus 5.15.8; cf. *Digesta* 48.6.1).

There is also evidence that the imperial government relied to a certain extent on provincial administrators to deal with the problems bandits posed to their individual provinces. Governors were expected to ensure that the regions under their purview were safe, peaceful, and purged of bandits (*Digesta* 1.18.13).[23] Accordingly, when Cornelius Fronto, the famous tutor of Marcus Aurelius, was on the verge of taking the governorship of the Roman province of Asia in the early 150s C.E. he considered taking a close friend by the name of Julius Senex onto his staff because of his expertise in, 'hunting down and suppressing bandits' (*Epistulae* 1).[24] Though governors might occasionally bring someone onto their staff who had a peculiar skill in dealing with bandits, typically most governors relied on provincial police forces to do the job, even if they were not always very effective (Dio Cassius 54.12.1).

By the second century C.E. it appears that official military posts were set up with the specific purpose of pursuing bandits and there is also evidence that at this time official offices were established for the suppression of banditry (Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 2.18; MacMullen 1966: 259). One third-century papyrus from Bacchias in the Fayum refers to officials called 'bandit-catchers',[25] and in the fourth century Libanius mentions officials whose sole purpose was to pursue bandits (Libanius, *Orationes* 25.43).

In addition to the creation of direct offices to fight banditry the government periodically employed the army to deal with problems relating to banditry (Josephus, *Bellum judaicum* 1.304–13; Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae* 14.420–30; Ammianus Marcellinus 19.13). Apuleius

tells the story of a bandit gang, which was particularly troubling a certain region, and how through a single nod of Caesar the army was dispatched and utterly wiped out the gang (*Metamorphoses* 7.7; cf. Scriptores Historiae Augustae, *Severus* 18.6). Dio Cassius records that Quintilius Varus, a governor of Germany in the first century C.E. employed his soldiers to guard roads, escort provision trains, and arrest bandits (Dio Cassius 56.19.1–2). In Egypt, where the evidence is most abundant, there are many examples of various provincial officials drawing on the resources of the army (Shaw 1993a: 318; McGing 1998: 169–174).

If banditry could not be suppressed through the normal use of force or through the regular channels, extraordinary measures were occasionally resorted to. When the Emperor Julian was faced with a particularly glaring problem with bandits it was reported that he was able to largely purge the roads of them by granting them pardon and then enlisting them in the army (Libanius, *Orationes* 18.104).[26]

As part of the government's active campaign against bandits it gradually came to realise that in order to fully disrupt banditry it had to search out and punish any who had sheltered or had even been marginally associated with them. Thus when Antoninus Pius was proconsul of Asia in the year 135/6 C.E. it was reported that he required the irenarchs of his province to interrogate all captured bandits about their associates and those who had sheltered them (*Digesta* 48.3.6.1). Likewise, Baebius Juncinus the prefect of Egypt in 210 C.E. ordered the *strategoi* of the Heptanomia and Arsinoite nomes to be vigilant in searching out those who sheltered and aided bandits since it would be 'impossible to exterminate bandits' without eradicating those who helped them.[27] Interestingly, at about the same time, a fragmentary report from a court proceeding in Antinoopolis reports that someone was charged with 'complicity with bandits' and was then tortured to extract information.[28] Finally, in later law it was decided that those who supported bandits were to be punished as bandits themselves and that 'those persons who could have apprehended the bandits but who let them escape, having received money or part of the loot, are to be treated as in this same category [as bandits]' (*Digesta* 47.16.1).[29]

Despite the government's numerous efforts banditry persisted and even appears to have grown and increased in the later Empire given that

it figures much more prominently in the source material (MacMullen 1966: 256–259).[30] Part of the reason banditry was never completely stamped out may have had to do with the fact that at a certain level the imperial and even provincial government regarded some degree of banditry as normal and indigenous to pastoral borderlands and other suitable areas (Kloppenborg-Verbin 2000: 249–250).[31] Additionally, given the administrative and policing handicaps inherent in the Empire it was difficult to form a well-organised governmental department to wage a systematic war against it (Nippel 1995: 1–3; Shaw 1984: 16). Ancient police forces worked mainly in the cities, and their motivation and effectiveness diminished substantially the further they went outside of the city walls (Hopwood 1989: 177–180; Millar 1981: 67–71).

Conclusion

Though this examination has taken a fairly general approach to the subject of banditry in the Roman Empire by examining a number of sources, the purpose of this analysis has not been to treat every aspect of banditry, nor would such an undertaking be possible in an examination of this sort. This analysis has attempted to illuminate only a few facets of banditry in order to show how it affected ancient land travel in the Roman Empire. While the subject of ancient banditry has been the focus of previous analyses, few have sought to investigate its effect on ancient travel as most have been concerned with either uncovering its underlying causes or with using it as a social barometer to gauge popular unrest. However, given that the most common scene of banditry is the road or highway and the victim most often the traveller, perhaps more attention should be paid to its effect on the various aspects of ancient land travel.

Travel beyond the city walls in the Roman Empire posed a number of dangers, particularly for the ordinary traveller, and if Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* is indicative of ancient reality then banditry was the foremost danger. Bandits assaulted, abducted, and even killed travellers in the course of their raids, and the evidence suggests that the ordinary person sometimes travelled at a great risk. Yet despite the potential hazards of bandits, people still braved travel by taking a number of

precautionary measures against it that ranged from the practical to the supernatural. Also the government, at its various levels, was aware of the problem banditry posed to the security and commercial interests of the Empire and took proactive measures against it. Even if the government was never successful in wiping it out or completely suppressing it, its efforts helped to make the roads safer.

Notes

1. It is likely that Apuleius' novel is an elaboration of an earlier narrative having to do with human metamorphosis. Only one other extant version of this story exists, that of Lucian's *Lucius, or the Ass*.
2. For the standard and most comprehensive English treatment of the subject of ancient banditry see Brent Shaw 1984: 5–52, and 1993a. For a detailed listing of some of the source material see Ramsay MacMullen 1966: 255–68.
3. The Greek and Latin vocabulary for piracy was virtually synonymous with that of banditry. This occurs as early as Homer (Odyssey 3.73).
4. In ancient rhetoric in general the term 'bandit' was commonly used as a means to discredit your opponent. Celsus in his *True Doctrine* refers to Jesus as a 'bandit' in order to discount his messianic claims (Celsus *apud* Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.59).
5. Ancient sources also tended to make a distinction between the *modus operandi* of a 'bandit' and that of a common 'thief' (*fur*/*kleptēs*), even though both accomplished the same thing – acquired goods illegally. The thief was regarded as working more stealthily and in a covert fashion employing little or no violence, while a bandit operated more candidly, almost always worked with a group of close associates, and typically stole goods by means of sheer force and excessive violence (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 7.54).
6. It is difficult to determine the typical size of a bandit gang given that ancient sources rarely disclose specific numbers. However, Josephus reports that a 'brigand chief' named Jesus who operated near Ptolemais had a gang of about 800 men (Josephus, *Vita* 104–11). Dio Cassius speaks of a famous bandit named Bulla Felix who operated in Italy with a gang of 600 men (77.10.1). Thus it would appear that bandit gangs could become quite large, even numbering in the hundreds.
7. While Dio Cassius is describing a situation in ca. 60 BCE, the same conditions that facilitated banditry undoubtedly persisted later on in the Empire.
8. A factor that swelled the numbers of those engaged in banditry was the 'enforced desertion' of large numbers of soldiers when rival commanders, each with his own army, vied for the pay and provision of a district (Shaw 1984: 30). While the victor's army would remain intact, the other's had to disband, and the soldiers were either forced to become civilians or were compelled out of necessity to a life of brigandage.
9. Sometimes even people of relatively high status, who could afford armed guards and attendants, were reluctant to travel on the roads due to fears aroused by bandits (Symmachus, *Epistulae* 2.22; cf. Seneca, *De beneficiis* 4.35.2).

10. While the degree of violence employed in the various attacks is periodically in response to the level of opposition from the intended victim(s), sometimes it is not altogether clear why either little violence or excessive violence was employed. This may have simply depended on the temperaments of the bandits at the time.
11. For bandits between Jerusalem and Jericho see Strabo, *Geographica* 16.2.40.
12. Similar parables involving bandits can be found in rabbinic sources: Mishnah, *Berakot* 1: 3; *Pe'ah*. 2: 7; *Shabbat* 2: 5; *Numbers Rabbah* 11: 5; Leviticus *Rabbah* 30: 6. See also B.S. Jackson 1972, especially pp. 20–40; B. Isaac 1984, p. 183; M. Hengel, 1961, pp. 37–38.
13. P. Fay. 108 = *Fayum Towns and the ir Papyri*, eds. B.P. Grenfell, A.S. Hunt and D.G.Hogarth, London, 1900 (Egypt Exploration Society, Graeco-Roman Memoirs 3), pp. 259–60. While the papyrus that preserves the incident does not use the technical terms for either 'bandits' or 'banditry' to identify the perpetrators of the crime, the crime has all the characteristics of a typical bandit attack. Furthermore, the scribe who preserved the incident employed a term (Grk. *kakourgoi)* that was often used interchangeably with the term for bandits (cf. P.Oxy. XII 1408 = *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* XII, eds. B.P. Grenfell and A.S. Hunt. Egypt Exploration Society in Graeco-Roman Memoirs. London, 1916, pp. 11–15). It is interesting to note that when Jesus was crucified Matthew and Mark report that he was crucified between two 'bandits' (*lïstai*) (Matthew 27: 38, 44; Mark 15: 27), while Luke reports that it was between two 'criminals' (*kakourgoi*) (Luke 23: 32, 33, 39).
14. P. Lille I 6 = *Papyrus grecs* (Institut Papyrologique de l'Université de Lille) I, eds. P. Jouguet, P. Collart, J. Lesquier and M. Xoual in 4 fasc., 1907, 1908, 1923 and 1928. (Vol. I appeared all together [with Fasc. I and II reprinted] in 1929 as part of the Travaux et mémoires de l'Université de Lille, hors série).
15. It is not totally clear in the *Vita Sancti Martini* why Martin was kidnapped by the bandits since he was not held for ransom or served as a slave.
16. Shaw, 1984, p. 10, who cites the following inscriptions: *ILS* 2011, 20307 (Rome); *ILS* 5112 (Dalmatia); *CIL* III 1559 (Dacia); *ILS* 5795 (Africa). In the later Empire attacks by bandits eventually came to be recognised within Roman law as a common cause of death (*Digesta* 13.6.5.4).
17. L. Casson, 1974, p. 76 points out, 'Only exiles, refugees, or the like travelled alone; ordinary voyagers took along at least one servant …'
18. P. Mich. III 214 = *Michigan Papyri* III. *Miscellaneous Papyri*, ed. J.G. Winter and others, Ann Arbor, 1936 (Univ. of Mich. Studies, Humanistic Series 40), pp. 275–280.
19. P. Fay. 108. See note 13.
20. Government messengers and pages were often accompanied by at least one bodyguard for their journey (P. Oxy. IX 1193).
21. Josephus reports that when a convoy of Marcus Agrippa's finance officer Ptolemy was sacked along the *via maris* of the Esdraelon plain some individuals immediately fled and escaped the bandits by leaving behind their valuables (Josephus, *Vita* 126–27). Likewise, whenever Lucius' human travelling companions sensed that bandits might be near, they immediately took to their heels and tried to flee (Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 8.14–23). On the other hand, instead of fleeing, there were those travellers who either out necessity, duty, or self-confidence, defended themselves from the attack. Apuleius tells the story of a certain Arignotus who put up a valiant defence when a gang of bandits beset him (*Metamorphoses*

2.14). However, in the end it did little good as he was eventually overpowered and his heroics resulted in his untimely death.

22. It even appears that Christians may have periodically aided the government in its war against banditry, albeit unofficially, through evangelism. Clement of Alexandria and later Eusebius report that the Apostle John evangelised some mountain dwelling bandits near Ephesus who were greatly troubling the roads and actually reconverted the 'bandit chief' who was a lapsed Christian (Clement, *Quis dives salvetur* 42; Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.23.5–19). Sulpitius Severus' *Vita Sancti Martini* reports that when St. Martin was abducted by a group of mountain-dwelling bandits in the Alps, he evangelised them and was even successful in turning a few of them from the trade to a religious life (5).
23. In this section of the *Digest* entitled 'Concerning the Duties of a Provincial Governor' is written: 'It is the duty of a good and serious governor to see that the province he governs remains peaceful and quiet ... [He] must hunt down desecrators and pillagers of sacred property (*sacrilegi*), bandits (*latrones*) ... [and] must use force against their collaborators ...'
24. As it happened, it appears that Fronto never ended up governing the province of Asia. Yet his interest in bringing such a one as Julius Senex onto his provincial staff suggests that there may have been a bandit problem in the province.
25. BGU I 325 = *Aegyptische Urkunden aus den Königlichen* (later *Staatlichen*) *Museen zu Berlin, Griechische Urkunden*. Berlin, 1895, p. 317.
26. Earlier Marcus Aurelius was reported to have taken a similar measure, although on a lesser scale (Scriptores Historiae Augustae, *Marcus* 21.2).
27. P. Oxy. XII 1408. See note n. 13.
28. P. Ant. II 87 = *The Antinoopolis Papyri II*, eds. J.W.B. Barns and H. Zilliacus. (Egypt Exploration Society, Graeco-Roman Memoirs 37). London, 1960, pp. 92–93.
29. The importance of informers to combat banditry does not necessarily mean that bandits had popular support as the Roman Empire did not have an adequate police system and always relied on informers to combat crime.
30. Almost all of the available information on specific laws against banditry and the punishments meted out against bandits come from the later Empire in the law codes of Theodosius and Justinian.
31. It also appears that some gangs were supported and even employed by rich patrons or local communities. While most convicted bandits received the *summa supplicia*, some were only fined, which suggests that persons of high social rank were supporting them. While the laws were the same for both the upper class (*honestiores*) and the lower class (*humiliores*) in the later Empire, the penalties meted out for each class were different. Convicted bandits from the lower classes (*humiliores*) were not treated like ordinary criminals, they were usually subject to the *summa supplicia*, the harshest penalties of *damnatio ad bestias, damnatio ad cruxem*, and *damnatio ad metallum* (*Digesta* 48.19.16.10). In the early Empire convicted bandits were typically thrown to wild beasts in the arenas (Seneca, *Epistulae* 7.4; Strabo, *Geographica* 6.2.6; Dio Cassius 77.10.3) or were crucified (Mark 15.27; cf. Josephus, *Bellum judaicum* 2.253).

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