



A late afternoon street scene in ancient Pompeii: with traffic restrictions lifted during the two hours before nightfall, the driver races his chariot between stepping stones over which two ladies have just walked to avoid the puddles of rainwater.

THE EMBATTLED DRIVER IN ANCIENT ROME

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As a driver do you become annoyed with present-day traffic conditions? Most probably you do and the same may be said of motorists in all of our major cities. But this does not make you a suffering citizen typical of the twentieth century alone, for you are only experiencing an aggravation as old as the concept of pleasure vehicles themselves. Do not go back a hundred years in your mind or, for that matter, even five hundred years; rather consider the time in thousands of years. Three millennia ago drivers swore in the streets of Egyptian Thebes and in Babylon too. In all probability their antagonism was di-

rected toward pedestrians, but when we come to the busy streets of Imperial Rome we find sufficient cause for drivers to become annoyed with one another as well as with pedestrians. And surely those who walked the streets of Rome had a few choice words for drivers.

From the legislative and literary material produced in the heart of the ancient Roman world, we can recreate rather accurately the situation existing in the field of vehicular traffic. A comparison of problems and solutions in ancient Rome with those existing in our American cities today offers us some rather interesting surprises.

First we must remember that the Romans handled chariots and wagons drawn by horses or mules which required more physical strength than that expected of a driver today. Then too, the city of Rome had grown without the guidance of a city planning commission and a master scheme of streets and byways. In Rome one did not find the touch of a Hippodamus or a Haussmann. A few broad and many narrow streets twisted their way among an intricate mesh of winding alleys and footpaths.

By the time of Julius Caesar, vehicles had become such a potential problem to the citizens and magistrates alike that something had to be done. For quite different reasons a law had been passed at the end of the 3rd century B.C. forbidding women to ride in carriages. This was included in a war measure restricting the display of feminine luxury and we can imagine with little difficulty the feeling which the ladies of Rome had for Gaius Opius, the originator of the law. Twenty years later they forced the repeal of this law but during the 1st century A.D. the same restrictions on feminine riding were again in force. This seems to have been the result of Caesar's legislation of 44 B.C.

The problem faced by Caesar, however, was of much broader scope and it took a man such as

he to produce the ultimate solution. At one sweep he outlawed the use of private vehicles on the city streets during the first ten hours of the day. In every Roman day there were twelve hours of daylight adjusted according to the season. This meant that during the last two hours before darkness settled one might begin his driving. It followed that all business deliveries were made at night while heavy, privately owned coaches which carried paying passengers and their baggage left the city very late in the afternoon or early in the morning before the sun rose.

There were certain exceptions as one would expect. Triumphant generals, vestal virgins, and priests could always employ chariots or carriages; one would also find vehicles in the processions prescribed for particular religious festivals. Since the Imperial Roman government was intensely interested in the construction of public buildings, it also granted contractors working on these structures the right to convey their materials by wagons during the day. If work was in progress on an addition to a private home, however, no one would presume to transport the building blocks by day.

One would also find in Rome certain residential streets where vehicles were forbidden both day and night. Signposts were not necessary to



A street of shops in the Market of Trajan, one of the commercial districts where goods were delivered by wagons at night.



A bas relief showing the covered carriage in which, for a fee, the ordinary Roman traveler would be carried on his journey along the Roman highways.



Ruts worn in the paving of the ancient road to Tusculum and Labici where it passed under the arches of the aqueduct at the Porta Praenestina, the modern Porta Maggiore.

indicate this condition as it was far easier to erect stone posts across the roadway. From Pompeii we learn that road construction often involved the provision of stepping stones leading across the street from one sidewalk to the other. Thus pedestrians avoided the streams of water and refuse flowing down streets not adequately provided with underground sewers, and at the same time night traffic was kept at a slow speed so as not to collide with these obstructions. In a similar manner, ruts worn in the paving stones served to guide the wheels of chariots and wagons.

The narrow streets of the capital itself posed quite a problem in regard to the direction in which traffic should move. Some streets offered passage for only one chariot or wagon at a time and yet there seems to have been no official attempt to create one-way streets. In effect, the driver himself accomplished this by sending on ahead a runner who held up traffic at the opposite end until the chariot had passed through. We know that wealthy Romans maintained such runners when they traveled out of the city. If one did not resort to this device there was every possibility of a traffic jam in the middle of the block. Imagine the uncouth words of rough wagon drivers as they kept the neighborhood awake in the darkness of the night while they disputed the right of way among themselves.

Yet exactly who had the responsibility of apprehending those who ignored traffic regulations? To answer this we must first understand the strong feeling which the Romans had for the division of the day into two parts, the hours of daylight and those of darkness. By the light of the sun life ran its normal routine. After dark, however, chance and the distorted nature of some men created a world in which the lives of citizens were very likely to be threatened. With this in mind, the emperor Augustus in A.D. 6, after an unsuccessful earlier attempt, dealt with the nocturnal threat of fire by establishing a fire brigade of seven thousand men. Officially known as the *Vigiles*, the group was familiarly called the "little bucket fellows." Since he had already divided Rome into fourteen regions, the emperor grouped these men into units of one thousand, each unit responsible for two regions in the capital.

In addition to patrolling the streets in search of fires, the men also took into custody runaway slaves and persons who appeared to be engaged in criminal activities, especially footpads and housebreakers. For traffic violators they probably had little concern since restrictions were not in effect during the night. However, they would quell any street disturbances caused by vociferous wagon drivers. In effect, Augustus thus gave to this body of firefighters the police responsibilities formerly assigned to the Three Men of the Night, a special staff organized in Republican times to patrol the streets at night. Under Augustus these three men continued their duties as guardians of prisoners in the *Carcer* or state prison.

What about the daytime, one asks. In addition to the *Vigiles* or night fire brigade and police force, there also existed a body of three thousand men known as the Urban Cohorts. They were assigned duties principally for the daytime. As there were barracks at the city gates for the *Vigiles*, it seems logical that certain contingents of the Urban Cohorts should be assigned to the gates from sunrise until almost sunset, at least for the purpose of enforcing the law. Thus it would be quite easy to stop any carriage or chariot trying to enter the city proper and to take into custody anyone attempting to leave the city in a wheeled vehicle.

Of course, during the early Empire the old city walls of the 4th century B.C. no longer surrounded the entire area of Rome which had continued to grow outward from the ancient center. Inasmuch as Augustus created a special curatorship for roads beyond the city walls, one concludes that it was merely the heart of Rome

within the Servian walls which was governed by the traffic laws.

It is of interest to note that the *Vigiles* were not regular Roman citizens but men who had been freed from slavery. In earlier times the city of Athens had employed slaves as metropolitan police and it is pointed out that Augustus, in establishing his troops of night firemen, patterned the organization after that existing in Alexandria where slaves were used in a similar capacity. Augustus utilized freedmen, however, deeming this arrangement safer and more politic. One can develop arguments for and against the loyalty of such men, but the evidence indicates that the faith of the Athenian, the Alexandrian, and the Roman governments was not misplaced. Of course various pressures were brought to bear and Rome itself offered the inducement of a restricted form of Roman citizenship granted when the freedmen had served a period of six years as members of the *Vigiles*.

Having given recognition to law enforcement in the streets, we should like to know the officials responsible for hearing a case presented against a traffic offender. The matter is quite simple. If the lawbreaker was taken at night by the local contingent of the *Vigiles* he would be haled before their supervising officer, the Prefect of the *Vigiles* when he opened court the next day in his barrack headquarters outside the old Porta Ratumena. The prefect presumably led a rather strenuous life overseeing the activities of his men by night and listening to minor infractions of the law by day. This routine was prescribed by the laws themselves, but we can be sure that the poor man delegated his authority during some portion of the night so that he might secure a few restful hours of sleep.

In the case of a daytime violator, the matter would be presented to the Prefect of the City under whose authority the Urban Cohorts were placed. This prefect held court in the Forum of Augustus where stood the great temple of Mars the Avenger. In theory and practice, the Prefect of the *Vigiles* was subject to the control of the Prefect of the City and in only the most important traffic cases concerning persons of high rank would the Prefect of the City ever become involved. In either case punishment would probably take the form of a fine. Again, however, we must remember that evidence suggests that traffic violations occupied a miniscule portion of the docket submitted to each of the magistrates mentioned. We are left with the definite impression that traffic violations were rare. This is quite logical



(Left) The Porta Tiburtina, the city gate through which traffic flowed on the way to Tibur. Officials were stationed at city gates to check the vehicles passing through. (Right) The Forum of Augustus where the Prefect of the City presided over his court. In the forum stand the ruins of the Temple of Mars Ultor, vowed by Augustus at the battle of Philippi.

when all vehicular traffic had been eliminated during such a large portion of the day. It would appear that the streets of Rome at night were more or less the free domain of drivers who were almost completely unrestricted in their behavior.

After reviewing the matter of traffic laws and their enforcement within the city of Rome, the curious reader may wish to know how the Roman government allocated the responsibilities for maintaining the streets in good condition. The answer to this question is complicated by the fact that in the transition from Republic to Empire some magistrates lost portions of their authority to newly created government positions. Among the various Republican city magistrates there existed those known as the *aediles*. Under the emperor Augustus this office continued and was held by four men at one time who were responsible for the policing of streets and market places as well as the supervision of a body of slaves for fighting fires. The *aediles* were assisted by a group of four men who spent their entire time looking after the condition of the streets. Even though the fire brigade was transferred in A.D. 6 to the Prefect of the *Vigiles* it is probably that the four men continued to assist the *aediles* in keeping the streets clean.

It was not until the 4th century B.C. that the citizens of Rome enjoyed the luxury of their first paved street but by the 2nd century B.C. many streets in the capital were paved with tufa blocks. When a street had to be paved or repaved the *aediles* allocated the work to certain contractors. The public treasury assumed the cost for the sec-

tion extending out to the middle of the street in front of public buildings; apparently property holders were assessed for the remaining costs, if indeed they were not assumed by the emperor or some person of wealth and prominence.

Owners of buildings were also responsible for keeping the sidewalks swept clear and the emperor Domitian in A.D. 92 decreed that shop owners could no longer block the sidewalks with counters displaying their wares. Thus the pedestrian was not forced to stumble through miscellaneous debris or walk in the streets to avoid the merchants' counters. Again the *aediles* were the persons responsible for enforcing the regulations and, if a property owner did not live up to his obligations, the *aediles* paid men to remove the offending obstacles and then charged the cost to the owners.

From all of this it is quite evident that the late Republican and Imperial governments considered the safety and unimpeded flow of pedestrian traffic a primary requirement in the effective protection of private and public life during the daytime.

Although some few people may have ridden horseback, this too was forbidden eventually. But at night all restrictions on vehicular movement were removed. Commercial wagons lumbering up the expressways of Italy, such as the Appian Way or the Ostian Way, were halted at the city gates until the last two hours of sunlight. Persons deciding after breakfast that a ride in the country might be in order had to go to the city



The barracks of the Vigiles at Ostia, the ancient port of Rome. Continents of the Vigiles at Rome served four month tours of duty at Ostia.

gates in a litter or on foot and there pick up a carriage or chariot. Although some wealthy citizens may have had carriage houses attached to their homes, we can assume that large public garages near the city gates still remain to be identified by archaeologists.

Those who planned a trip in advance left the city in their vehicles before sunrise or else very late in the afternoon. Since while traveling one spent the night in an inn or at the home of a friend, it was preferable to cover as much ground as possible before nightfall and so one was less likely to leave Rome late in the day. Early morning was the time when most travelers passed, sleepy eyed, through the dim dawn shadows of the city gates and rattled off awkwardly at first between the trees and tombs along the highway.

Imposing and important as were the famous Roman roads, their effectiveness began and ended at the walls of cities. Unlike our modern speedways they did not convey traffic into the heart of a community. Although many passed directly through smaller towns, yet traffic was halted at the limits of these communities. By a law of the emperor Claudius, the traveler had to descend from his chariot or carriage and go through the town on foot, in a carrying chair, or in a litter. This must have been a great nuisance if the law was seriously enforced. We suspect, however, that officials were not strict. For example, Hadrian, in the early 2nd century A.D., decreed that no horses should be ridden within city limits. Yet, later in the same century, Marcus Aurelius had to issue the same mandate as well as others

repeating earlier legislation against riding and driving inside the limits of any city. This obvious repetition of laws reveals a rather lax state of law enforcement. However, the vehicular traffic laws themselves carried the means of their own destruction; from the beginning exceptions were granted other than those relating to religious functions. By the 3rd century A.D. these exemptions had been extended to various state magistrates and were assumed by others of high social station. Pedestrians were no longer free from the threat of injury or even death at the hands of a careless chariot driver.

Since those days, drivers have continued to multiply and municipal governments have become increasingly reluctant to legislate against the privileged class, the only one with funds sufficient to purchase and maintain private means of transportation. In our own times this distinction of wealth and privilege no longer holds true: the ownership of an automobile does not imply wealth. In our large communities traffic congestion has become a serious and controversial problem. The convenience and prerogatives of the greater portion of our citizenry are involved, yet one wonders if perhaps they, like the citizens of ancient Rome, should surrender the right of driving in the business and commercial sections of our cities. Even with the declining effectiveness of Roman traffic bans, it was unthinkable that anyone should drive through the forum which comprised the heart of a Roman city. Have the ancient Romans offered us a solution which may well be applied to our situation today?