

Which of us has not been caught in a hopeless traffic jam, cursing the bustle of modern city life and longing for the tranquillity of the carefree past? Wouldn't it have been better to live in the Ancient World, when cars and rush hours were unknown? The answer, surprisingly, is no.

The confusion of wheeled and animal traffic is aptly described by Horace: "A building-contractor presses along hurriedly with his mules and porters; a huge derrick hoists a stone block, then a wooden beam; sad funeral processions jostle the heavy wagons; a mad dog runs one way, a muddy pig another." Imagine trying to drive in such a jumble! Julius Caesar prohibited the use of vehicles in the streets of Rome during the daytime, and the regulation was extended to all Italy by Claudius and to the entire Empire by Marcus Aurelius; but exceptions were made for construction vehicles, circus processions and garbage wagons, and these were quite sufficient to clog the narrow, winding streets. Hadrian tried banning the transportation of large loads in the city, but only, it seems, because houses and sewers were collapsing from the rumbling vibrations.

The aediles (magistrates in charge of civic services) had to be vigilant for merchants obstructing the passage of vehicles by displaying goods in front of their shops. At night, when all types of traffic were permitted, the noise of wagons, and of swearing drivers stuck in traffic jams, prevented Juvenal getting any sleep. Under such conditions, no one would drive for pleasure! The second-century medical writer Galen tells us that nobody travelled by private carriage within Rome. When Caligula dispatched messengers to drive through the city to the Senate, his action was regarded as insane.

The situation was not much better elsewhere. Seneca complains about the endless rattle of vehicles passing through the seaside resort of Baiae. A municipal regulation from Aix-les-Bains in Savoy forbids the parking of animals in the streets, except on market days and at travellers' inns. And a law of Pergamon in Asia Minor requires the magistrates to prevent encroachments on the public highway passing through the city's territory.

Congestion was not the only hazard that plagued ancient drivers. The roads were bumpy, and the heavy wagons left deep wheel-ruts (about ten cm deep and 120 cm apart) in the cobble stones. The tombstone of a Roman Spaniard records that he died from bouncing out of a cisium (two-wheeled cart), and the emperor Nero was thrown from his ten-horsepower chariot at the Olympic Games. Also, there was no insurance for wrecked vehicles, as there was for ships. Another danger, especially when driving at night on back roads, was being held up by bandits (who are amply attested in literature and on their victims' epitaphs), or killed by aggrieved pedestrians (like Oedipus), or simply getting lost. Hecate, alias Trivia, was the witch-goddess who frequented Y-junctions, and travellers unable to figure out which fork to take must have been willing enough to believe that the place was bewitched! A helpful and recently-found road sign from Roman Spain reads, "Traveller, turn right for the public highway."

For pedestrians, conditions were even worse. The poet Martial complained, "I can hardly break through the long processions of mules and the marble blocks you see hoisted by many ropes" in the streets of Rome. Seneca mentions pedestrians being knocked down by others in a hurry, and Horace angered a

fellow citizen by accidentally bumping into him. An inscription records two children trampled to death by a crowd on the Capitoline. People must have been run over by vehicles -- Tullia, wife of the Roman king Tarquin the Proud, deliberately rode over her own father in the street -- or trampled by animals, or killed by stone blocks falling from wagons or overhead cranes. Almost predictably, it is Juvenal who gives the most graphic account of the dangers: "Our way is blocked by the

waves of people ahead, while the great crowd behind presses against our backs. One man pokes me with his elbow, another with a hard litter-pole; one knocks a beam against my head, another a nine-gallon drum. My legs are coated thick with mud. Soon huge heels tread on me from every direction, and a soldier plants his hobnailed boot squarely on my toe."

Somehow, Yonge and Bloor at 5 p.m. will never seem so bad.