

ITER PRINCIPIS HADRIAN'S IMPERIAL TOUR

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The early Greek rulers did it. And the Roman emperors followed suit: making a royal tour of the provinces, showing the flag, as it were, accepting the plaudits of the crowds at each stop and connecting with the people according to carefully prescribed customs and rituals. The Romans called it the *iter principis*, the "itinerary of the prince."¹ The emperor's arrival at city after city was the *adventus*, the "advent" or "arrival," marked by a carefully orchestrated ceremony designed to crystallize in the inhabitants' minds what they were supposed to think about their ruler. The *iter principis* was, in effect, an imperial propaganda machine.

The emperor Hadrian undertook such a journey to his eastern provinces in 129/30 C.E.² The itinerary was carefully planned for maximum effect. Among other places, he visited Palmyra, a caravan city whose emerging wealth and power might become a bulwark on the Syrian frontier against the Parthian kings, Rome's eastern enemies. From there he went to Petra, former seat of independent Nabatean kings, where the local grandees probably needed reconciling, and then to the cities of Judea, land of the troublesome Jews, still in a precarious situation after renewed disturbances at the beginning of Hadrian's reign.

Hadrian, whose full-name was Publius Aelius Hadrianus, served as Roman emperor from 117 to 138 C.E. He was a man of huge talent and engaging contrasts.

Dubbed Graeculus, "Greekling," he was a genuine devotee of Greek culture (although it was Roman architectural ideas that culminated in the celebrated Pantheon in Rome, completed under his auspices, and in his pleasure gardens and palaces at nearby Tivoli).

Of colonial Roman background, Hadrian commanded the Roman legions in numerous campaigns and warmly embraced the Greek god Zeus. In the Greek style, he also took a Bithynian lad named Antinous as his lover. An intellectual who dabbled in poetry, music and mathematics, debated with professors, and wrote and delivered his own Greek speeches, Hadrian was also a

resourceful military strategist. He sought to reinforce the Roman Peace by surrounding the empire with continuous stone ramparts, notably Hadrian's Wall in Britain.

But peace also needed internal stability. Lacking daily newspapers, television and the World Wide Web, Hadrian used other powerful means to promote consensus. Like an American president or secretary of state, Hadrian spent much of his reign on the road, projecting Roman power to the furthest reaches of his domains, attempting everywhere to reconcile even the most troublesome inhabitants and to create a consensus in favor of Roman rule. Hadrian wanted to promote stability. Hellenism, the culture of Greece, would flourish everywhere under Roman aegis. In his view, by this gift the general happiness of the human race would increase.³

Along the projected route, Roman soldiers stationed in the provinces built and upgraded roads and erected milestones with inscriptions giving the emperor's names and titles—less for measuring distance than to honor the emperor. Those famous Roman roads did improve communications, but their more immediate purpose was to astonish the provincials with the emperor's godlike ability to create his own highway and to travel wherever he wished.

His retinue included crack imperial troops dressed in the most splendid uniforms. He himself rode in a litter or a decorated horse-drawn wagon that was the functional equivalent of Air Force One.

The *adventus*, his arrival in a city, was the occasion for a celebration—and more. Typically, a city's populace, led by the municipal senate and dignitaries, issued forth from the gates to greet the emperor and conduct him into the city, waving palm branches (universal symbols of victory), singing his praises in hymns and sacrificing for his well-being. For the arrival, the emperor left his wagon, donned ceremonial armor and mounted a beautiful white horse, appearing as a victorious military leader. After this entry into the city, orators would step forward to address the emperor and the gathered throngs, speaking of the devotion and admiration the emperor inspired among the people. The emperor sacrificed in the city's main temple and presided over an assembly in the theater and over contests of gladiators and charioteers in the amphitheater and circus. As sovereign, he held court to settle legal disputes and hear petitions, and as premier benefactor of cities he conferred honors, such as the rank of metropolis, on a city or even promoted it to the status of a Roman colony,

meaning that its local aristocracy and many other inhabitants would be Roman citizens, with all the legal and social advantages this entailed. Other immediate benefits might include the remission of taxes or the construction of a new aqueduct to keep the baths supplied with fresh water—all designed to cement the city's loyalty and devotion.

The *adventus*, and similar arrivals of earlier Greek rulers, made such a powerful impression upon the gospel writers that they presented Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday as the ceremonial arrival of a king in a city. Jesus chose as his mount an ass, not a horse, to signify by contrast his humanity and humility, but the crowds sang his praises as a king and waved the obligatory palm branches of victory.

Hadrian's journey is described in three ancient texts—the writings of the Roman historian Dio Cassius and of the Christian Epiphanius of Salamis, and the *Augustan History*. Although none of these gives the details of his itinerary, it is possible to reconstruct his route by studying the texts in conjunction with archaeological remains and ancient routes. From these sources, we know that after wintering in Antioch in 129/30 C.E., Hadrian arrived in Palmyra early in the new year. A local grandee named Malē Agrippa entertained the emperor and his troops, as we know from an inscription. Hadrian then passed west and south, through Damascus, Bostra (the provincial capital of Arabia) and Amman, then on to Petra, which had renamed itself Hadrianē Petra in his honor. Imperial coins bearing the inscription "ADVENTUS AVG ARABIAE" confirm that the emperor thoroughly traversed Arabia, as the *Augustan History* declares.

Retracing his route, the emperor arrived in Gerasa (now Jerash in Jordan), which dedicated a triumphal arch to him sometime in 130 C.E. From there he crossed into Judea on a route that took him through Beth-Shean (Scythopolis). Coins inscribed "ADVENTI AVG IVDAEAE" attest to his travels here. The beautiful cuirassed bust of Hadrian featured on the cover of this issue was originally part of a statue (once displayed in a nearby military camp) that, for contemporaries, would have evoked the magnificent figure of the emperor, celebrating his imperial advent in Scythopolis.⁴

Hadrian then passed on to Caesarea, the provincial capital and already a Roman colony, which Hadrian nevertheless "refounded," according to coins that the city's mint issued to commemorate the visit. To galvanize the city's pro-Hadrian emotions, the emperor promised a



THOUGH NOW HEADLESS, the emperor Hadrian still cuts an imposing figure in this statue from Caesarea, the largest city in Palestine after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 C.E. Carved from a 7-ton block of imported porphyry, the statue was probably enshrined in a Hadrianeum, a temple devoted to Hadrian, although no such building has been discovered yet. In the second century C.E., local officials frequently erected such temples after securing the emperor's permission when he visited on his royal tour, called the *iter principis*. Here the Caesareans would have offered thanks to Hadrian for the civic renovations he commissioned during his visit—including the rebuilding of the city's aqueduct.

new aqueduct, which at his command the soldiers soon constructed. The Caesareans apparently responded by dedicating a Hadrianeum in his honor, a temple to Hadrian as a god, with a colossal cult statue of the emperor in purple stone that still delights visitors to the site.

Then Hadrian set out on the road to Jerusalem. Upon his advent there, among the straggling inhabitants of a city that had lain half in ruins since the Roman destruction of 70 C.E., he announced the greatest benefit of all, the founding of the new Roman colony Aelia Capitolina,* to be named for himself, Aelius Hadrianus, and for Jupiter Capitolinus, the Roman, imperial version of his favorite god, Zeus. Thus Hadrian intended to elevate the well-being of the Judeans and to reinforce their attachment to their emperor.

*On the question of whether Hadrian founded Aelia Capitolina in 130 C.E., on this trip, or in 136 C.E., after the Second Jewish Revolt, see Hanan Eshel's article in this issue, p. 46. That Hadrian is known to have founded other colonies during his *iter principis* provides further support for the earlier date.


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After Jerusalem, Hadrian went to Gaza and Egypt, where he suffered the devastating loss of his beloved Antinous, drowned in an inhospitable Nile. What happened thereafter in Judea must have pained him nearly as much as the loss of Antinous. The Jews would not acquiesce to what they considered the desecration of Jerusalem. Although he was only pursuing standard Roman policy, exploiting the familiar patterns of imperial travel and advent, the emperor had miscalculated badly. The result was one of the bloodiest wars that the Romans ever fought—the Second Jewish Revolt (132-135 C.E.)—which became a historical turning point for both Jews and early Christians. 

¹See Helmut Halfmann, *Itinera principum: Geschichte und Typologie der Kaiserreisen im römischen Reich* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1986).

²Kenneth Holum, "Hadrian and Caesarea: An Episode in the Romanization of Palestine," *The Ancient World* 33 (1992), pp. 51-61. More generally, see William F. Stinespring, "Hadrian in Palestine, 129/30 A.D.," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 59 (1939), pp. 360-365; see also Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992).

³On Hadrian's vision for the Roman empire, see Jocelyn M.C. Toynbee, *The Hadrianic School: A Chapter in the History of Greek Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1934), still one of the best books on Hadrian. Another "best book," of a very different kind, is Marguerite Yourcenar's brilliant *Memoirs of Hadrian*, trans. Grace Frick (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1954), a fictional autobiography based on the ancient sources.

⁴See Gideon Foerster, "A Cuirassed Bronze Statue of Hadrian," *'Atiqot*, English ser. 17 (1985), pp. 139-160.