



# **THE HAGIOGRAPHY OF SAINT ABERCIUS**

**INTRODUCTION, TEXTS, AND TRANSLATIONS**

Edited and translated by  
Ken Tully and Pamela D. Johnston



# The Hagiography of Saint Abercius

This broad-based critical edition is the first-ever modern translation of all of three adaptations of the hagiography of St. Abercius, the 2nd-century bishop of Hieropolis, based on one of the most valuable inscriptions of the early church, the Abercius Inscription.

This volume features the Greek texts complemented by facing translations for all three versions of the hagiography. The edition also includes introductory chapters, a composite critical text of the inscription, an Epitome, Synaxarion, and Greek/English indices. The reader will have access to the most expansive reconstruction of both the hagiography and the famous inscription based on the oldest traditions—twenty-nine 10th- and 11th-century manuscripts. The English translations are based on a majority reading, accompanied by an exhaustive Greek text apparatus that preserves the numerous variant readings. The volume provides scholars with new substantive material for research, while the introductory chapters help to familiarize readers interested in early Christianity with the Abercius tradition.

*The Hagiography of Saint Abercius* is an invaluable resource for students and scholars working on early Christianity, early church history, and hagiography, as well as those interested in manuscript transmission.

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**To Richard Hamilton,**

**under whose supervision my adventure with Abercius  
began, whose legacy of contagious enthusiasm and  
energetic support for students continues to inspire.**

**and**

**To Marshall Johnston,**

**who has always made Arcadia House a *locus amoenus*.**



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# Preface

In 1994, somewhere between my study carrel in the Greek Classics Room and the shelves in Canaday Library, Bryn Mawr College (too long ago now to remember what sparked the initial interest), my adventure with Abercius began. A few months later, my supervisor at the time, Richard Hamilton, now the Paul Shorey Professor Emeritus of Greek, was handing back his ninety-four recommended MA thesis edits on the epitaph of the saint. In 2019, research resumed, this time in the library at St. Stephen's, Oxford University. My MPhil dissertation focused almost exclusively on the Abercius Inscription, but in April 2020 work began in earnest on a critical text of the associated hagiographies, inspired by the three-version edition of Theodore Nissen, now well over a century old.

A significant number of manuscripts were not included in the Nissen text, and thanks to digital access to reproductions, the additional manuscripts were secured from Russia, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Greece, Turkey, and England, just to name a few. Securing reproductions of all twenty-nine manuscripts took several months.

What the project lacked was a Roman historian who could sort through the many historical, biographical, political, and geographical references in the hagiography, and, by the way, someone also competent to be a sounding board for my Greek translations. The appropriate candidate was a fellow graduate student who sat across the aisle in the Greek Classics Room back in 1994, Pamela D. Johnston, now Associate Professor of Classics and Ancient History, Fresno Pacific University.

Abercius was the subject of intense scholarly attention when William Ramsay discovered the inscription fragments in 1883. Interest waned, but every decade since has seen important publications that have advanced the study of the stone and the associated hagiography. We owe an immense debt to Ramsay and his insights into both the inscription and the hagiography. Our hope is that this critical edition will continue to advance our understanding of the famous epitaph and the hagiography it inspired.

Ken Tully  
Pamela D. Johnston

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We are grateful to a number of individuals for their assistance with this edition. First, many thanks to Markus Vinzent for his meticulous review of the Hagiocentric Greek text and translation. We are indebted to Alan Trigle for his skillful German translation of the Seeliger/Wischmeyer text. Many thanks to Villanova graduate students Ryan Yeazell, Katlyn Yost, and Benedicte Berg—Ryan for his transcription of the Greek text of the Epitome and his scrupulous review of the composite inscription text, Katlyn for her most helpful translation of the Latin introduction to Nissen's 1911 edition, and Benedicte for her thorough review of the introductory chapters.

We are indebted to Carol Harrison and Chad Leahy for their evaluation and suggested emendations of our initial submittal. Ken would like to give special thanks to his wife, Cheryl, for her management of the numerous international bank transfers to acquire manuscripts. Pam would like to thank Greg Camp for assistance with maps, Alice Neikirk and Rachel Schultz for their general overall support, and most of all, her husband, Marshall, for his many rounds of editing, wording suggestions, and frequent applications of strong coffee.

We also want to recognize the assistance of Svetlana Berak, State Historical Museum, Moscow, and Reverend Deacon Alexander Koutsis, Ecumenical Patriarchate, Istanbul, for their efforts in securing several key manuscripts.

Ken Tully  
Pamela D. Johnston

## **Part 1**

# **Introduction**





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# 1 Stone, story, and scholarship

## Introducing Abercius

Housed in the Vatican Museum, the Abercius Inscription, a twenty-two-line narrative epigraph, is universally considered the most valuable of all ancient inscriptions witnessing to the early church. It is that epigraph which inspired an ancient author to pen the hagiography published in this edition. However, it is important to note that while we study the reception of the famous inscription in the hagiography, the inscription owes its fame to that same hagiography. As the story goes, in 1882 Sir William Ramsay published the lines of an epitaph for a man named Alexander, an epitaph which he had discovered in Central Phrygia.<sup>1</sup> Once these lines were published, two scholars, Giovanni Battista de Rossi and Louis Duchesne, recognized that they resembled an epigraph included in the hagiography of St. Abercius.<sup>2</sup> Ramsay, who at the time was wholly unfamiliar with Abercius, the very next year would discover two fragments of the original inscription of the saint only a few miles away. Hence, the relationship of the stone and the story is symbiotic; each owes its current fame to the other.

Recently, there has been renewed interest in that relationship between the stone and the story. Two authors in particular, Markus Vinzent<sup>3</sup> and Allen Brent,<sup>4</sup> each revisit the connection of the inscription and the story of the saint. While challenging long-standing assumptions about that relationship, there are repeated references to the critical texts of Nissen and Wischmeyer. As one sees a renewed interest in revisiting the text of the hagiography, its manuscript tradition, and the record of the inscription it contains, it underscores the need for a new critical text and translation as presented in this volume—a critical text not based on speculative emendation or extrapolation,<sup>5</sup> but on a broader base of the most ancient manuscripts collated and translated in majority readings. Paul McKechnie's 'Aberkios and the Vita Abercii',<sup>6</sup> takes a step in that direction by providing an English translation, although this is based on a version found in Theodore Nissen's 1912 critical edition. In addition, he delivers a much-needed running commentary on the narrative and dialogues of the hagiography.

### Celebrating the city

One recent scholar, Peter Thonemann, has proposed a masterfully researched interpretive framework while elucidating a number of anachronistic inconsistencies

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originally noted by J. B. Lightfoot.<sup>7</sup> Thonemann's theory of composition contends that the hagiography is a historical fiction fabricated by someone familiar with the geography of Hierapolis,<sup>8</sup> who created the composite tale from several monuments and documents he had at his disposal:

The *Life of St Abercius*, then, is a uniquely valuable document of the processes by which the Christians of late antique Asia Minor refashioned their (pagan) Roman past in their own image. Through creative readings of those second-century epigraphical monuments which survived in the urban landscape of the fourth century, the author of the *Life* offers an 'archaeology of desire'.<sup>9</sup>

Eve-Marie Becker would concur that the hagiography is as much about Hierapolis as it is about Abercius:

The inscribed funerary stele of Abercius of Hierapolis (ca. 2nd century CE) exemplifies a transformation over time not only of genre but of memorial significance. The reception . . . documents how the personal memory of an individual is transformed once it is incorporated into the larger framework of the *memoria* of a city in which it was housed.<sup>10</sup>

The identification of the city with an ecclesiastical figure like Abercius, who is considered 'Equal to the Apostles', cannot help but bolster its prestige. One need only consider the fact that nearly three-quarters of the narrative takes place in or around Hierapolis itself. The city's situation allows its patron saint ready access east and west to implement his universal apostolic office. At one point in the narrative, the author boldly proposes that the ministry of the bishop of backwoods Hierapolis is required in the seat of the empire, Rome itself. Christ appears to the saint in a vision and pronounces, 'Abercius, it is by my plan that you will arrive in Rome, so that, indeed, also those who are in it may come to know my name' (§43 *Epi.*). Abercius was to 'labor there for the salvation of men' (§43 *Hag.*) and 'strengthen even your brothers in Rome in the faith' (§43 *Chr.*). Arriving during the winter and having exorcised the demon from the daughter of the emperor, Abercius remains in Rome until spring, having 'spent a considerable time in Rome. He taught and strengthened the congregations of believers in the apostolic proclamation, having settled discord and harmonized them in oneness of mind' (§67 *Hag.*). Despite the fact that both the author of the inscription and the author of the hagiography give Rome a central place in each of their narratives, it is Rome, the seat of the apostolic successor to Peter, which needs the help of the bishop of Hierapolis to save souls, strengthen believers, restore unity, and quell dissension.<sup>11</sup> Abercius is the hero from Hierapolis. His journey to the cities in the East was no less effectual:

Exhorting and teaching them all, he reconciled almost all the churches of Christ at variance with one another. For at that time the heresy of Marcion greatly disrupted the churches of the Christians. Crossing the Euphrates River, he spent time both in the city of Nisibis and all the cities situated in

Mesopotamia. Similarly, he passed through the neighboring regions there. For all the churches welcomed him as truly an apostle of Christ.

(§69 *Chr.*)

So influential, in fact, was his ministry in the East, that the churches there voted to bestow on the bishop of Hierapolis the title ἰσαπόστολος, 'Equal to the Apostles':

Let us take a vote for the man to be called 'Equal to the Apostles'. For better stated, his deeds give this title to him. For we know of none after the principal apostles who crossed such an extent of land and sea for the salvation of the brothers.

(§70 *Chr.*)

If the ministry of Abercius was dramatic in Rome and the East, it was utterly sensational in Hierapolis itself. The narrative, which opens with the raving mad populace of the town out to lynch the saint, transitions abruptly with the mass conversion of its citizens, who at the close of the story gather *en masse* to escort the body of the saint to his famous tomb. Hence, these hagiographies ought to be read in light of the municipal focus of the story.

### Fact in fiction?

In his article 'Grabepigramm und Vita des Bischofs Aberkios', Reinhold Merkelbach focuses his attention on the historicity of selected details in the hagiography of St. Abercius. His intention was to establish the validity of the *Life*, thus legitimizing it as an indispensable interpretive tool in understanding the inscription:

Most scholars continue to ignore *The Life*; everything that is there is reportedly fabricated from the verses [of the inscription] or completely invented. I believe that *The Life* represents a valuable testimony to the condition of Christianity in the time of the emperor Marcus, and that a satisfying interpretation of the verses only becomes possible, if one consults *The Life*.<sup>12</sup>

Merkelbach insists that although later attempts by revisionists to embellish the biography actually adulterated it, the text contains accurate insights into the Christianity of the 2nd century. Orazio Marruchi, who supervised the replication of the Abercius inscription, makes something of the same point.

The acts of Abercius are certainly legendary; but we know that in all these hagiographic legends, even the most discredited, there is always a fund of historical truth; so that if the episodes are altered and sometimes even fabulous, the main characters are real. . . . The acts we possess are certainly derivatives from some older document and compiled at a time when his sepulchral monument must still be preserved and in veneration.<sup>13</sup>

## 6 Introduction

Although he finds the use of the hagiography as an interpretive tool an interesting theory, overall Eckhard Wirbelauer has difficulties with Merkelbach's methodology.<sup>14</sup> Brent Allen is even less sympathetic:

Scholarly discussion of the restoration has largely ignored an important procedural principle, namely, that the fourth-century *Vita Abercii* must not be used as a serious commentary on the inscription but rather the inscription must speak independently for itself: the fourth-century legend is merely a fable that explains the ignorance rather than the knowledge of its author.<sup>15</sup>

Wirbelauer and Allen, in part, reflect the opinion of William Ramsay himself on the narrative. 'There is a tone of vulgarity and rusticity about it which gives it rather low place in the class of religious romances to which it belongs. It might be fairly discarded as an unprofitable fabrication'.<sup>16</sup> Despite this harsh assessment, Ramsay admits that something of value can be salvaged from the narrative.

It is now an accepted principle that even the genesis of legend is an historical process, which may throw light at least on the character of the age when the legend grew, if not on the age to which it professes to belong. . . . The Christians of Phrygia supplied the place of the old anthropomorphic deities by the saints, who had been the champions of their faith. . . . Fidelity of local detail is one of the most important characteristics of the class of tales which is here described. This class of tales has grown up among the people of a district, and has the character of popular legend.<sup>17</sup>

Ramsay does give the hagiographer a passing grade for creativity, admitting he had to have been a man of 'fair education and knowledge' and 'many details are not of such a character as he would be likely to invent, but bear all the marks of free creative popular mythology'.<sup>18</sup> In Ramsay's estimate, 'the literary form is due to the genius, or want of genius, of the writer'.<sup>19</sup>

David Bundy posits that the literary form was due to the ingenuity of the author. The hagiographer creatively seeks to imitate the symbolic tenor of the epigraph. According to Bundy's theory of composition, the hagiography itself, like the inscription, is an intentionally symbolic work, in which several key characters are representative, not real.

The author took considerable care with the narrative and framework within which it is set. However, the historical data in *The Life* [is] designed to lend credibility and interest to the story. They conform to and expand upon the Abercius Inscription.<sup>20</sup>

For Bundy, the three blind women represent the Montanist prophetesses; Euxeinianus' blind mother, Phrygella, represents Phrygia; Euxeinianus himself embodies a disciple of Marcion; while the demon personifies the excommunicated Marcion who leaves Rome and returns to Asia Minor. The narrative is written with an anti-Marcion



undercurrent. Abercius, whose apostolic-like ministry is attested by the miraculous, claims to have possession of the real Pauline texts, as the inscription itself testifies.

A contemporary of Ramsay, J. B. Lightfoot, likewise sees the artistry in its composition as an intelligently crafted fiction. Furthermore, when it comes to the record of the inscription, he makes a plea for its authenticity. '[T]hese Acts, though legendary themselves, contain an epitaph which has the ring of genuineness, and which seems to have suggested the story to the pious forger who invented the Acts'.<sup>21</sup>

Margaret Mitchell sees value in the hagiography's physical description of the stone placed on the tomb of Abercius as a βωμός (altar), considering it essential in a contextual interpretation of the inscription as a material monument.<sup>22</sup> However, for Mitchell, it is the creative fiction of the hagiography that transforms the simple material monument of the inscription into a supernatural souvenir.

[A] deft tale that combines features of the Acts of the Apostles and Apocryphal Acts, with their love of travel lore, with Gospel narratives about Jesus' exorcisms . . . the author has transformed a known and venerable (if already weathered and worn) local artifact from what he may have perceived as an uncomfortably 'pagan-looking' monument into an ironic trophy of the exorcistic power of Jesus Christ.<sup>23</sup>

Most authors would agree; the hagiography exerts a transformative influence on the inscription. Whether that be viewed positively or negatively depends on the commentator. For Allen Brent, the narrative imposes an unwarranted interpretive framework on the monument.

If the *Vita Abercii* reinterprets a number of pagan artifacts with a narrative that gives them a Christian expression, why should we assume that the epitaph on the βωμός was itself Christian and the one exception sticking out from his otherwise pagan landscape. Given the project of cultural transformation witnessed by the production of the Christian *Vita Abercii*, what are the grounds for identifying the βωμός as untouched by this fourth-century, Christianizing project?<sup>24</sup>

The hagiography has had a century of critics who view the narrative as an immaterial interpretive distraction and irrelevant fabrication, with only a handful of advocates who find in it a pertinent record in finally grasping the elusive lines of the inscription and as a substantive witness to 2nd-century Christianity. In either case, the hagiography persistently defies neglect. As scholars continue to debate its value, they continue to make constant appeal to the text contained in its manuscript tradition. Interest persists, despite the fact that these texts have remained largely inaccessible to scholars and students who are not comfortable working directly in Greek. This volume seeks to satisfy the demand for both parties, providing a substantially updated critical text for scholars and translations from majority readings for students and interested readers alike.

## Shared plot

The manuscript tradition of the hagiography is so broad that it presents three distinct narrative adaptations, which we refer to in this edition as the Christocentric, Hagiocentric, and Epigraphic. This volume offers the first-ever comparative analysis of the three accounts and encourages reading these adaptations in succession or studying them in parallel. Although each of the narratives tracks the same basic storyline, the Christocentric is distinguished by its extended theological dialogues and high Christology. The Hagiocentric, with its panegyric preface and conclusion, persistently extols the saint and is distinguished from the other two by its brevity and lack of direct quotation. The Epigraphic version, made popular through its inclusion in *Patrologia Graeca*, makes generous use of terminology found in the inscription. Explicit discourses on free will, soteriology, the necessity and efficacy of baptism, and the proper response to localized persecution find their way into all three narrative versions. Though no discourse on ecclesiology occurs, the reader has a clear view of the episcopate, presbytery, deaconate, and catechetical instruction.

Because the three recensions follow the same storyline, Theo Nissen added a numbering system based on common episodes. Nissen's system has been retained with a few minor adjustments, allowing the reader to quickly turn from an episode in one version to the same episode in another. This same numbering system reveals 'gaps' in the Hagiocentric and Epigraphic when compared to the fuller Christocentric account. The Epigraphic presents a shorter version of the evangelistic sermon to the repentant crowd and lacks §15. Neither the Hagiocentric nor the Epigraphic include the exhortation to believers after the healing of Phrygella (§24–25). Interestingly, these are segments that the Christocentric redactor plagiarized from *The Vercelli Acts*.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the Epigraphic truncates the discourse with Euxeinianus (§31–37), a discourse appropriated from Bardaisan's *The Book of the Laws of Diverse Countries*.<sup>26</sup> Finally, the Epigraphic omits the miracle of the potable water (§75).

Mention should be made that apart from the three longer recensions of the hagiography, this edition also includes an Epitome,<sup>27</sup> a 900-word summary of the longer narratives, and a Synaxarion,<sup>28</sup> an even briefer synopsis of the saint's story. Though several folios are damaged, the Epitome encompasses the entire narrative from the decree of the emperors to the burial of the saint. The Epitome does not include the exhortation to believers after the healing of Phrygella (§24–25), the healing of the three blind women (§26–30), the contents of the discourse with Euxeinianus (§32–38), the ministry to the churches in Rome (§67), the request of Abercius for leave to Syria (§68), the encounter with the farmers in Aulon (§72), his ministry after the return to Hierapolis (§73–76), nor the record of the inscription (§77).<sup>29</sup> The Synaxarion, a mere sixteen lines in the original manuscript, is part of a collection of saints' lives.<sup>30</sup>

As already mentioned, the narrative versions follow the same core plot. The story begins with the Roman emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus issuing an edict that requires all Roman provinces to hold a festival worshipping the pagan

gods. Abercius is disturbed at the celebration taking place in his hometown of Hierapolis in Phrygia Minor. In a dream, Christ commands him to smash the idols responsible for this widespread deception. During the night, the elderly Abercius breaks into the city's temple and destroys its idols. The horrified temple attendants report the incident to the city council, who plan to arrest Abercius and bring him before the Roman governor. However, an incensed mob makes its way to the house of Abercius, bent on burning it to the ground along with the saint. When warned by his disciples, instead of escaping town, Abercius calmly discourses on persecution and then makes his way to the marketplace, where he begins to teach openly. The mob catches wind of this and is ready to tear the saint to pieces when three demon-possessed men, stripped naked, run out of the crowd and towards the saint. The crowd is stunned when Abercius exorcizes the demons, and now, in fear, the crowd confesses that the God of Abercius is the one true God and is in an emotional panic. Abercius reassuringly speaks at length about repentance, forgiveness, and the necessity of baptism.

Next, Abercius heals Phrygella, the blind mother of an influential citizen of Hierapolis, Euxeinianus, who then comes to the saint in appreciation for the miracle. The two men dialogue at length on free will, the character of God, the moral law, and salvation. Abercius then exorcises another demon, who this time threatens to bring Abercius to Rome. The demon himself immediately makes his way to the capital city and takes possession of the teenage daughter of Marcus Aurelius and Faustina. All efforts by the pagan diviners are futile, and the demon demands that the emperor send for Abercius. When Abercius does arrive, he has the girl brought to the hippodrome, where he exorcises the demon and commands him to carry an altar in the arena to his hometown of Hierapolis and place it outside the south-facing gate of the city. The demon obeys; the girl is healed. When offered a reward by the queen, he discourses on money, contentment, and generosity.

Abercius spends several months in Rome preaching to the churches there. He next travels throughout Syria, crossing the Euphrates to Nisibis. During this journey, he is designated 'Equal to the Apostles'. Upon his return, Christ appears to him and announces that his labors are over. He prepares a tomb with the famous inscription and has the church appoint his successor. After laying hands on the new bishop, Abercius prays, and his spirit leaves for heaven.

## Notes

- 1 'In October 1881 when wandering among the villages of a wide and fertile plain in central Phrygia, we observed the following inscription on a stone at the door of a mosque. . . . The surface is mutilated, and the following text is completed by the aid of the biography. When I published the text in 1882, I was ignorant even of the name of the Phrygian saint. "Citizen of the select city, I have, while still living, made this (tomb), that I may have here before the eyes of men a place where to lay my body; I, who am named Alexander, son of Antonius, a disciple of the spotless Shepherd. No one shall place another in my tomb: and if he does, he shall pay 2,000 gold pieces to the treasury of the Romans, and 1,000 to our excellent fatherland Hierapolis. It was written in the year 300 (A.D. 216) during my lifetime. Peace to them that pass by and think of me"'. Ramsay, 'Early Christian Monuments in Phrygia V', 393.

- 2 'This epitaph alone would furnish indubitable evidence as to the epigraph of Avircius, from which it quotes five lines, spoiling the meter by substituting for the name Avircius "Alexander, son of Antonius". These inferences were drawn by Di Rossi and Duchesne immediately on the publication of the epitaph of Alexander'. Ramsay, V, 393–4.
- 3 Vinzent, *Writing the History of Early Christianity*, 77–159.
- 4 Brent, 'Has the Vita Abercii Misled Epigraphists', 325–61.
- 5 The critical text of Wischmeyer contains any number of speculative emendations. Wischmeyer, 'Die Aberkiosinschrift als Grabeepigramm', 24–6. Nissen seeks to extrapolate the Greek text from an old Russian version to correct what the editor considered corruptions in the Paris 1540 text. Nissen himself concedes, 'Tamen quoniam ipso illo Graeco exemplari caremus lubrica res vel potius temerarium est eum verbis Russicis Graece versis recuperatum edere velle'. Nissen, *S. Abercii Vita*, XIV.
- 6 McKechnie, 'Abercius and the *Vita Abercii*', 166–86.
- 7 Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 500–1.
- 8 While the hagiographies identify the hometown of Abercius as Hierapolis, we agree with Ramsay that it was instead Hieropolis. Ramsay, 'The Tale of Abercius', 339–53. See also Chapter 2, *Chronology and context: notes on geography*.
- 9 Thonemann, 'Abercius of Hierapolis', 277.
- 10 Becker, 'Transforming Memory', 11.
- 11 Guarducci, to the contrary argues for the preeminence of the Roman church. Guarducci, 'L'iscrizione di Abercio e Roma', 174–203.
- 12 Merkelbach, 'Grabepigramm und Vita des Bischofs Aberkios', 125.
- 13 'Gli atti di Abercio sono certamente leggendari; ma noi sappiamo che in tutte queste leggende agiografiche anche le più scredate vi è sempre un fondo di verità storica; di maniera che se gli episodi sono alterati e talvolta anche favolosi, i principali personaggi però sono reali. . . . Gli atti che ne possediamo sono certamente derivati da qualche documento più antico e compilato in un'epoca in cui il monumento sepolcrale di lui doveva essere ancora conservato ed in venerazione'. Marruchi, 'Nuove osservazioni sulla Iscrizione di Abercio', 38.
- 14 Wirbelauer, 'Aberkios, Der Schüler des reinen Hirten', 359–82.
- 15 Brent, 351.
- 16 Ramsay, 'Early Christian Monuments in Phrygia IV', 262.
- 17 Ramsay, 'Early Christian Monuments in Phrygia III', 151–2.
- 18 Ramsay, III, 157.
- 19 Ramsay, III, 155.
- 20 Bundy, 'The Life of Abercius', 175.
- 21 Lightfoot, 'Saint Paul's Epistles', 54, n.1.
- 22 Mitchell, 'Looking for Abercius', 303–35.
- 23 Mitchell, 316.
- 24 Brent, 332.
- 25 One could make a case that the original Abercius hagiography, that is, the prototype from which our recensions are derived, is a creative adaptation of *The Vercelli Acts*. See also Chapter 3, *Doctrine and discourse: parallel plots*.
- 26 See Chapter 3, *Doctrine and discourse: extended discourse*.
- 27 Macedonia, Ohrid, Narodni Muzej 4 (Mošin 76) ff. 513–17.
- 28 *Menologion of Basil II*, Vatican, Vatican Apostolic Library, 10th, Vat.Gr. 1613, 129.
- 29 See Chapter 8, *Tracing traditions: the Epitome*.
- 30 See Chapter 8, *Tracing traditions: the Synaxarion*.

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## 2 Chronology and context

### Historical considerations

#### Prelude

The unanimous use of the spelling ‘Hierapolis’ in the manuscripts for the hometown of Abercius and the archeological, geographic, and numismatic evidence forwarded by Sir William Ramsay identifying the hometown of the bishop as Hierapolis, modern-day Koçhisar, Sandıklı, left us wavering about which spelling to use in this chapter. At issue here is the need to distinguish Hierapolis in then–Phrygia Major, modern day Pamukkale, from the Hierapolis in then–Phrygia Minor, where the fragments of Abercius’ epitaph were discovered, and which the geographical descriptions of the *Life* support as the hometown of the saint. It remains unclear why the hagiographer would adopt the spelling ‘Hierapolis’ for Abercius’ hometown, when his own descriptions of routes taken to the city confirm it as Hierapolis. Ramsay himself argues that Christian and Greek influences combined to alter the spelling during the period from the 2nd to the 4th century, since the spelling ‘Hierapolis’ designated it as ‘the city of the temple’.<sup>1</sup> However, this change introduced the potential for ambiguity since there were now two cities with the same name in Phrygia. How does one eliminate this confusion? As Ramsay himself asserts, ‘It would be wrong to alter a literary passage, and to thrust into it the name Hierapolis in defiance of the MSS’.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we have arrived at something of a compromise. Where a clear reference is made to the hagiography, we will employ the spelling ‘Hierapolis’; conversely, when the context is geographical, we will use the spelling ‘Hieropolis’, at all time keeping in mind that we have one and the same city in mind, modern-day Koçhisar, Sandıklı.<sup>3</sup>

#### Introduction

The historical problems surrounding the *Life of Abercius* have been recognized for over a century, and have been addressed most recently by Peter Thonemann, Allen Brent, Paul McKechnie, and Markus Vinzent.<sup>4</sup> This chapter seeks to summarize these problems in order to outline, where possible, what elements may be considered as historically accurate, and what elements belong to the realm of historical fiction.<sup>5</sup> First we will look at the basic chronological framework of the *Life*, evaluating how it coincides with known datable events. Then the personalities

of the *Life* will be examined, along with the imperial edict and the Greek terms used for Roman institutions. We will then turn to the journey of the couriers to and from Hieropolis and of Abercius himself from Hieropolis to Rome and his subsequent travels and conclude with a few geographical notes.

The *Life of Abercius* is set during the period of the so-called ‘Five Good Emperors’. Ruling from 96 CE to 180 CE, they included Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius. The term ‘Five Good Emperors’ comes from Edward Gibbon in his monumental *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*:

If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus. The vast extent of the Roman Empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom.<sup>6</sup>

After the death of Antoninus Pius in 161, Marcus Aurelius (who is referred to simply as ‘Antoninus’ throughout the *Life*) ascended the throne and immediately requested that his adopted brother, Lucius Verus, be raised to the purple as co-emperor, a plan previously encouraged by Hadrian.<sup>7</sup> As their reigns began in March of the year 161 CE, this date forms an obvious *terminus post quem* for the opening of the Abercius story.<sup>8</sup>

## Chronological framework

The author of the *Life* seems to know some details about the lives of the co-emperors but makes several serious chronological blunders that make constructing a coherent timeline impossible. In other words, the sequence of several key events in the *Life* is irreconcilable with the actual historical record. To illustrate this, the relative sequence of certain key events as given in the *Life* may be constructed as shown in Table 2.1, with the actual date given.<sup>9</sup>

However, if we were to arrange the datable events in *chronological* order based on the historical data, it would look something like what is shown in Table 2.2.

*Table 2.1* Sequence of key events as given in the *Life*

<i>Sequence of key events as given in the Life</i>		<i>Estimated date</i> <sup>10</sup>
1	Earthquake at Smyrna <sup>11</sup> §48	177
2	Edict requiring sacrifices <sup>12</sup> (possibly in response to the plague) §1	166
3	Lucius Verus departs for Parthian War <sup>13</sup> §44	162
4	Lucilla at age 16 <sup>14</sup> §44–6	166
5	Aurelius’ letter to Euxeinianus; Aurelius holds the honorary titles ‘Germanicus’ and ‘Sarmaticus’ <sup>15</sup> §48	175–8
6	Aurelius leaves Rome to counter the Germanic threat <sup>16</sup> §59	168
7	Wedding of Lucius Verus and Lucilla in Ephesus <sup>17</sup> §45	164

Table 2.2 Sequence of key events from historical data

<i>Sequence of key events from historical data</i>		<i>Estimated date</i>
1	Lucius Verus departs for Parthian War	162
2	Wedding of Lucius Verus and Lucilla in Ephesus	164
3	Edict requiring sacrifices	166
4	Lucilla at age 16	166
5	Aurelius leaves Rome to counter the Germanic threat	168
6	Aurelius holds the honorary titles 'Germanicus' and 'Sarmaticus'	175–8
7	Earthquake at Smyrna	177

As one can see, the two lists cannot be reconciled with each other. It is evident that the author of the *Life* has used datable events to help provide the framework with which to scaffold his story, but has little regard for, or scant knowledge of, the actual chronology. The problems inherent in the chronology are discussed next in greater detail.

### ***The earthquake at Smyrna***

Although in the *Life* the earthquake pre-dates all other events, historically it did not occur until well after the marriage of Verus and Lucilla, most likely in 177. The author of the *Life* has used this event as the springboard for Aurelius' request for additional service from a certain Euxeinianus Pollio, 'a most important man' in the city, whose previous help during the earthquake had been conspicuous, and brought him to the attention of the emperor (§48 *Chr.*).<sup>18</sup> As Peter Thonemann points out, the author may in fact be working from an actual imperial letter to a later benefactor who rendered assistance to the Smyrnaeans. Certainly, parts of the letter in the three versions seem to mimic actual imperial correspondence.<sup>19</sup> However, if we date the imperial missive to post-177 because of the reference to the Smyrna earthquake, then Lucilla is already at least 27 years old, hardly the 16-year-old of the *Life*. Faustina would have died two years earlier, and (most problematic of all) Verus himself would have been dead for almost a decade!<sup>20</sup> As it stands, the reference to the earthquake in the letter as included in the *Life* would allow the author to put praise in the mouth of Marcus Aurelius and thus soften the request that Euxeinianus Pollio dispatch Abercius to the aid of Aurelius' daughter.

### ***The imperial edict and the plague***

We are told at the beginning of the *Life* that, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, a decree had circulated throughout the Roman Empire requiring various religious rituals, although the rationale for these is not explicitly stated. It is tempting to connect the command for rituals with the wave of religious activity undertaken in response to the ravages of the Antonine plague, which hit the Empire at the end of 165 or the beginning of 166, probably making its way back

along with the Roman army after the end of the Parthian War.<sup>21</sup> The Roman historian Dio Cassius states that at the height of the plague, some 2,000 people per day fell victim to the plague in Rome.<sup>22</sup> The author of the *Historia Augusta*, no great fan of Verus in general, claims that Verus brought the plague with him to those provinces through which he traveled on his return, and finally to Rome, although he attributes the ultimate blame to his commander Avidius Cassius, who failed to prevent his soldiers from sacking the city of Seleucia in violation of the treaty.<sup>23</sup> He also notes that the plague originated from a *spiritus pestilens*, ‘a pestilential vapor’, which wafted from a despoiled golden casket in a temple of Apollo in Babylonia.

The fear caused by the confluence of the outbreak of war and the plague was such that the ritual of the *lectisternia*, the propitiatory banquet offered to images of the gods on couches, was performed in the city of Rome. The *lectisternia* were performed to appease the gods, avert pestilence, or ward off enemies. They were supervised by priests, but the people also participated.<sup>24</sup> That the rites in the *Life* ordered by the co-emperors (§1, 3–4) were said to take place in the temple of Apollo in Hieropolis could be nothing more than a coincidence, but propitiation of Apollo as the offended god who not only brought the plague, but could also cure it, makes sense. We can also point to the mention in the *Epitome* of the people ‘feasting during the Festival of Apollo’ (§2–4 *Epitome*).<sup>25</sup> This theory would also explain why the ‘public sacrifices and libations to the gods’ took place all throughout the empire, as the plague was widespread. In fact, the references to Abercius healing the sick, not only in his city (§17) and the surrounding villages and countryside (§39), but also from Phrygia Major, Asia, Caria, and Lydia (§19), could also be seen as evidence for the plague’s spread throughout a wide area.

### ***The Parthian War and the Germanic threat***

The Parthian War with Vologases IV lasted from 161–6 CE. This war is mentioned in the *Life* as the reader learns that Verus had been sent by Marcus Aurelius to the East to fight Vologases (§44). Verus left in 162 and returned in 166. The absence of Marcus Aurelius from Rome during Verus’ campaign, as depicted in the *Life* (§59 *Chr.*), is chronologically impossible, since Aurelius did not leave Rome to combat the Germanic threat until the spring of 168, several months before the death of Verus.<sup>26</sup> By this time, Verus and Lucilla had been married four years prior, and Lucilla had given birth to three children. The Germanic War was the first time that the elder co-emperor had seen military action, and evidently the first time he had left Italy.<sup>27</sup>

Apparently, by having Aurelius absent from Rome at the time of the demonic possession, the author of the *Life* wished to highlight the role of the empress Faustina to correspond more closely to the inscription, with its mention of ‘a golden-robed queen’ (§77) while making no reference to a king or emperor, and therefore (rather conveniently, if anachronistically) he removes the emperor from the scene.

In the summer of 162, Verus sets off for the East as commander of the Romano-Parthian War against Vologases IV. He spends time in Apulia, visits

Corinth and Athens, where he is initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries, then sails to the Asian coast, traveling thence to Antioch.<sup>28</sup> The *Life* tells us that he had left ‘not long before’ the demonic possession of Lucilla (§44), and that ‘when the appointed time had arrived’ for the wedding, Verus had sailed from the East to Ephesus in anticipation of the planned wedding. While at sea, he received word from Aurelius that the wedding would be delayed, using, as the *Life* puts it, the pretext of the Germanic threat instead of Lucilla’s demonic possession. We are told that Verus ‘turned back for Antioch that is near Daphne’ (§45). There were several cities named ‘Antioch’ (Ἀντιόχεια) in Asia and Syria; the reference to Daphne makes the identification of this Antioch certain: it is the city on the Orontes river, founded near the end of the 4th century BCE by Seleucus I Nicator in honor of his father, Antiochus I Soter.<sup>29</sup> This identification is in line with the *Historia Augusta*, which states that Verus passed his winters at Laodicea, his winters at Daphne, and the rest of his time at Antioch.<sup>30</sup>

### *The baths at Agros Thermon and the grain dole*

In the *Life*, Abercius is traveling in the area near his home city. He comes to Agros-Along-the-River and is informed that ‘many were bedridden, afflicted by various illnesses’ (§39). After healing them, he prayed for a hot spring to well up in the area. Later, while in Rome, he asks Faustina, wife of Marcus Aurelius, for the construction of a bathhouse at the site, and we are told that she immediately put plans for the construction into action. While certainly there were hot springs and baths at Agros Thermon (and still are, at modern-day Hüdai Kaplıcaı in Turkey), it is unlikely that Faustina herself was responsible for their construction.<sup>31</sup>

Barbara Levick, in her biography of Faustina I and II, points out that, unlike the empresses of the principate and early empire such as Livia who were known for their extensive building campaigns, neither Faustina I nor II were known as builders. She states: ‘The impulse, which might have been started by Livia, for imperial women to finance public building had dissipated, and by the mid-second century both Rome and the Italian and provincial cities were well provided for’. The story of the construction of the baths, she continues, ‘is more valuable as a reminder of the anxiety that the health of their children presented to Marcus and Faustina II, especially after the plague had struck in 166’.<sup>32</sup>

According to the *Life*, Faustina also established a σιτηρέσιον, an allowance of grain, in the amount of 3,000 *modii* per annum ‘to the poor’ of the city, which continued until the time of Julian (§65–6).<sup>33</sup> Distributions of grain outside the city of Rome itself were not unknown—for example, Trajan sent grain to Egypt after a drought there; Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius may also have expanded grain distributions during periods of famine—but they do not seem to be very common.<sup>34</sup> In any event, just as with the gift of the bathhouse, Faustina’s reported largesse at the request of Abercius may be explained as one more piece of support for the saint’s beneficence toward the people of his hometown, thus elevating the status of both saint and city.

### *The wedding of Verus and Lucilla at Ephesus*

In the *Life*, Aurelius manages to forestall the wedding of Lucilla and Verus until after her delivery from demonic possession by Abercius by claiming that he could not accompany his daughter on the journey due to the exigency of the Germanic invasion, which required his presence (§48). In the *Historia Augusta*, however, we are told that Marcus Aurelius, Lucilla, Verus' uncle, and Marcus' sister traveled together on the first leg of the journey to Brundisium. Then, bidding farewell to her father, Lucilla and her chaperones traveled to Ephesus, where they met Verus.<sup>35</sup> Lucilla would have turned 14 years old on March 7, 164, although the *Life* gives her age as about 16 at the time of the demonic possession (§44).

But why the need for the trip to Ephesus? Why not wait until Verus returned to Rome? One possibility is that after reports had traveled back to Marcus about Verus' relationship with a mistress named Panthea from Smyrna, Marcus may have thought it prudent for the marriage to take place sooner rather than later.<sup>36</sup> Another theory posited by the author of the *Historia Augusta* is that Verus did not wish his co-emperor to travel to Syria, the site of his earlier debauches.<sup>37</sup>

The hagiography adds that the wedding took place 'at the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus' (§45).<sup>38</sup> Evidently the Christian author of the *Life* felt the need to have this marriage affirmed in a sacred space, although according to Roman custom, a ceremony in a temple was neither required nor customary. This would have been an unusual wedding, in that the usual Roman wedding ceremony began at the house of the bride's father. From there, the wedding procession traveled to the house of the bridegroom.<sup>39</sup> We simply do not know how this tradition was enacted in Ephesus, far from Lucilla's home in Rome. Lucilla stayed in Ephesus for some time and bore in good time three children to Verus.

### **Prosopographical concerns**

#### *Euxeinianus*

Thonemann, in his excellent article on the *Life*, argues very convincingly that the author has probably peopled his account with actual historical personages, some known to be active in the later part of Aurelius' career, thus suggesting that while his knowledge of Aurelius and Verus' activities in the 160s is sketchy, the author has access to relatively accurate information concerning the later part of their reigns.<sup>40</sup> For example, Euxeinianus Pollio, referred to as 'an important and influential figure in the city' (§20 *Chr.*), may be the same Quintus Claudius Pollio, son of Tiberius Claudius Euxenos, named in a mid-2nd-century inscription at the base of an honorific statue at modern-day Ahat (ancient Akmoneia).<sup>41</sup> If so, 'Euxeinianus' would be a variant of a standard patronymic, 'son of Euxenos'. This may also be the same individual attested as asiarch on five different issues of bronze coinage from Hieropolis. The coins give his name as 'Claudius Pollio, asiarch'. If he were an asiarch, he could thereupon reasonably be termed 'an important and influential figure'.<sup>42</sup> As for Caecilius, the procurator who first

informed the emperor of Euxeinianus' good works concerning Smyrna, we follow Thonemann, that he might be identified with a 'a certain M. Caecilius Numa, who was responsible for the construction of the heavily engineered highway through the mountains between Ephesos and Magnesia'.<sup>43</sup>

### ***Cornelianus***

The ἑπαρχος or ὑπαρχος τῆς αὐλῆς ('praetorian prefect') Cornelianus briefs the emperor on the city and Euxeinianus (§47), sends a letter to the governor of Asia, Spinther (§51), arranges for a ship to transport the couriers from Brundisium (§50), acts in the absence of the emperor as a welcoming party once the couriers arrive in Rome with Abercius (§58), sends the architect for the construction of the bathhouse at Agros Thermon (§66), sets up the grain distribution (§66), and arranges for a ship to take Abercius back after the exorcism (§68). He seems to be aware of previous imperial correspondence (§47)—in all, a fairly important figure in the imperial administration.

There is no 'Cornelianus' recorded as being ἑπαρχος or ὑπαρχος τῆς αὐλῆς during the period of about 160–80. Sextus Cornelius Repentinus, however, was praetorian prefect from 160 to (at least) 166.<sup>44</sup> Another possibility is that the author of the *Life* has confused this individual with Lucius Attidius Cornelianus, the governor of Syria during the Parthian War, suffect consul between 180–2 CE. Alternatively, Cornelianus could be identified with the *ab epistulis graecis* Cornelianus under Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, possibly the same Sulpicius Cornelianus mentioned in the correspondence of Fronto, but the wide range of duties performed by him would be problematic for an *ab epistulis*.<sup>45</sup> As Potter notes, 'in the case of the *ab epistulis graecis* it appears that specialized knowledge of government was not a prerequisite'.<sup>46</sup>

The consistency of reference to his position as ἑπαρχος or ὑπαρχος τῆς αὐλῆς throughout all versions of the *Life* must also be taken into consideration. Mason states that

ἑπαρχος appears in all periods and in all types of documents as the equivalent of *praefectus*; it has no other Roman meaning, although other words may be applied to *praefecti*.<sup>47</sup>

The term ἑπαρχος τῆς αὐλῆς could refer to either the *praefectus praetorio* or the *praefectus alae*. Mason notes that 'ἑπαρχος is used often alone for the *praefectus praetorio*, as ὑπαρχος is at a later date'. In Greek, an *ab epistulis* would be termed ἐπὶ ἐπιστολῶν or possibly ἐπιστολεύς, γραμματεὺς, or προστάτης ἐπιστολῶν.<sup>48</sup> The identification of the prefect Cornelianus cannot therefore be securely determined.

### ***Publius Dolabella***

The *Life* opens by noting that the governor of the province of Phrygia at the time of the imperial edict was 'Publius Dolabella'. The cognomen 'Dolabella' is attested

for the patrician branch of the *gens* Corneliī since the beginning of the 3rd century BCE. But which Publius Dolabella? Although the Dolabellae were a prominent family in the Republic, there seems to be only two Publii Corneliī Dolabellae who appear in the Empire: one was consul in 10 CE; the other was his son, suffect consul in 55 or 56 CE. Neither appear to have had activity in Asia.<sup>49</sup> If we look further back, Publius Cornelius Dolabella, suffect consul in 44 BCE, received Syria as his province in 43 BCE. Passing through Asia on the way to his province, he killed Gaius Trebonius, who was then proconsul of Asia. Dolabella could then be said to have been at least *de facto* governor of Asia, which included Phrygia at the time.

### *Spinther*

The erstwhile successor of Dolabella, Spinther, is an interesting case. The only attested Roman *gens* carrying that cognomen was a branch of the Corneliī Lentuli. Valerius Maximus tells us that Publius Cornelius Lentulus, consul in the year 57 BCE, received the nickname ‘Spinther’ because of his resemblance to a ‘second-part actor’ of that name.<sup>50</sup> Spinther was governor of Cilicia from 56–3 BCE, and at least part of the time would have also governed parts of Phrygia, including the dioceses of Synnada, Apameia, and Laodicea.<sup>51</sup> His son, Publius Cornelius Lentulus Spinther, was quaestor in 44 BCE under the earlier-mentioned Trebonius. Spinther *filis* minted coinage types bearing an abbreviated form of his *cognomina*.<sup>52</sup> And it is here where the Dolabella–Spinther connection can perhaps be made. On the death of Trebonius, Spinther took command of the province and drove out Dolabella. He could then be said to have ‘replaced’ Dolabella as governor (§51 *Chr.*).<sup>53</sup> So it appears the author of the *Life* had seen inscriptional or other evidence that referred to these events and then arbitrarily inserted them into his account for verisimilitude.

### *Valerius and Bassianus*

The two couriers, Valerius and Bassianus, are referred to as μαγιστριανοί, a Greek term corresponding to the Latin *agentes in rebus* that comes into usage around the time of Diocletian. These officials (also termed in Latin *veredarii*; in Greek βερεδάριοι) were entitled to use the imperial post roads, the *vehiculatio* or *cursus publicus* (see later), and the public horses. The *agentes in rebus* arose after the earlier (and loathed) *frumentarii* were disbanded by Diocletian, but soon acquired the same despised reputation.<sup>54</sup>

These ‘special agents’ of the emperor are first attested in 319 CE and may have been part of the administrative reorganization undertaken by Diocletian.<sup>55</sup> They would have replaced the earlier *frumentarii*, whose reputation had long been tarnished by their activities.<sup>56</sup> Like the *frumentarii* (who were organized under the authority of the praetorian prefects), they may originally have come into existence as a military structure.

Their Greek nickname, *magistrianoi*, comes from their placement under the *magister officiorum*. They are also described in the imperial letter to Euxenianus as ‘couriers of our imperial offices’ (§49 *Chr.* μαγιστριανοὺς τῶν θεῶν ἡμῶν



ὁφφικίων). Valerius and Bassianus are assigned by the emperor typical courier duties: delivering imperial correspondence and escorting Abercius to Rome, although thwarted in the latter by Abercius himself (§54–8). As Henry Thurston noted, their names could have been taken from Valerius Bassianus, who served as consul sometime before his death c. 183, and the author of the hagiography mistakenly identified him as two individuals.<sup>57</sup>

### *Titles in the imperial letter to Euxeinianos*

In the letter in the Christocentric version (§48 *Chr.*), the full title of Aurelius is given as ‘Imperator Caesar Marcus Aurelianus Antoninus Augustus Germanicus Sarmaticus’. Aurelius did not adopt the honorific *agnomina* ‘Germanicus’ and ‘Sarmaticus’ until 175, and dropped them in 178, so an imperial letter concerning a 16-year-old Lucilla would not have contained them, although it could have included the title ‘Armeniacus’, won in 164. Neither the Hagiocentric version nor the Epigraphic version include these two titles in the imperial titulature of the letter; they give simpler forms of the titulature: ‘Imperator Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus’ (§48 *Hag.*) and ‘Antoninus Imperator Augustus’ (§48 *Epi.*).<sup>58</sup>

## **The routes**

### *The cursus publicus*

The *cursus publicus* was the official Roman road system, established by Augustus Caesar.<sup>59</sup> Those couriers possessing a diploma, an official travel permit, or post warrant, could travel vast distances without incurring any expense, as lodging stations (*mansiones* or *stationes*) arranged at intervals of about 23 miles (37 km), and hostels (*mutationes*) at intervals of about 7–10 miles (11–16 km) along the way, were required to provide them with lodging, food, and a fresh change of horses as needed at no cost.<sup>60</sup> These services, located at convenient distances along the Roman roads, made it possible for couriers to travel expeditiously throughout Italy and the provinces.

### *The route of the couriers and Abercius*

We are told that the couriers were instructed to use all possible exertion on their journey (§50). According to the *Life*, they travel, evidently by horse, from Rome to the port city of Brundisium (two days), and thence by ship to the Peloponnese (seven days), by land to Byzantium (fifteen days), and sailing from there to Nicomedia (‘that very same day’). Using the *cursus publicus* (again on horseback, so it would seem) to Synnada (two days), they deliver the imperial letter to the governor, Spinther. They receive an escort from him for the journey and arrive in Hieropolis the same day nine hours later after a change of horses. The total time for their journey appears to be just under a month.

How realistic is this journey? First, the time given for the initial leg of the journey from Rome to Brundisium, two days, is highly implausible, if not downright impossible. The distance from Rome to Brundisium along the Via Appia is 365 miles (587 km). Plutarch tells us that Cato the Elder completed this journey in five days at great haste, with an average of about 73 miles (117 km) per day—presumably by horse.<sup>61</sup> This would be considered the upper limit of what would be possible on a good road with changes of horses. Given the more likely top speed of 45–50 miles (72–80 km) a day, it would have taken the couriers a little over a week to reach the port.<sup>62</sup> We must speculate that the author of the *Life*, who has so drastically underestimated the necessary amount of time needed for this leg of the journey, is unfamiliar with travel routes and times in the western part of the Empire.

The couriers then set sail from Brundisium, but the author gives their destination not as the more obvious Dyrrachium (modern-day Durrës), or Apollonia, where the post road of the Via Egnatia began, but the Peloponnese. The rationale behind this route is inexplicable. The shorter route to Dyrrachium (taking on average about one or two days sailing in good weather)<sup>63</sup> would allow the couriers to pick up the Via Egnatia at its western terminus and travel along it all the way to Byzantium, a distance of just under 700 miles (about 1,120 km).

Built in the mid-2nd century CE and named after Gnaeus Egnatius, governor of Asia in the mid-140s BCE, the Via Egnatia was considered a continuation of the 4th-century Via Appia, which linked Rome with the port city of Brundisium in southeastern Italy across the Adriatic. As one of the main routes from West to East, it would have been well supplied with *mutationes* and *mansiones* for the trip. Via this route, changing horses at *mutationes* and averaging up to about 50 miles (80 km) a day, they could have reached Byzantium in about fourteen or fifteen days.<sup>64</sup>

Alternatively, if by the ‘Peloponnese’ the author means Corinth, another possible (if unlikely) port,<sup>65</sup> then the couriers could possibly have taken smaller roads north until they reached Thessaloniki, where they could pick up the Via Egnatia, but why? It is highly unlikely they would have found the kinds of services on that leg that the more commonly traveled Egnatian highway offered. The route as described in the *Life* evidences that the author is simply in error as to the place where the couriers would have disembarked.<sup>66</sup>

The real crux here, though, is why the route from Brundisium to the Peloponnese and then by land to Byzantium in the first place? Ramsey concluded that the author of the *Life* is writing after the establishment of Constantinople (Byzantium) as the eastern Roman capital and gateway to the East, and so it would seem logical for the couriers to take that route.<sup>67</sup> But at the time of the reign of Marcus Aurelius, it would be far more common to sail directly to Ephesus (a sailing time of about ten days in fairly good conditions, hugging the coast when possible) and take the *cur-sus publicus* east from Ephesus through Laodicea up towards Apamea and hence to Synnada—a distance of just under 220 miles (about 350 km), which would bring them to Synnada in about five days, cutting the total amount of travel nearly in half. In any event, once at Byzantium, travel time to Nicomedia (57 miles or

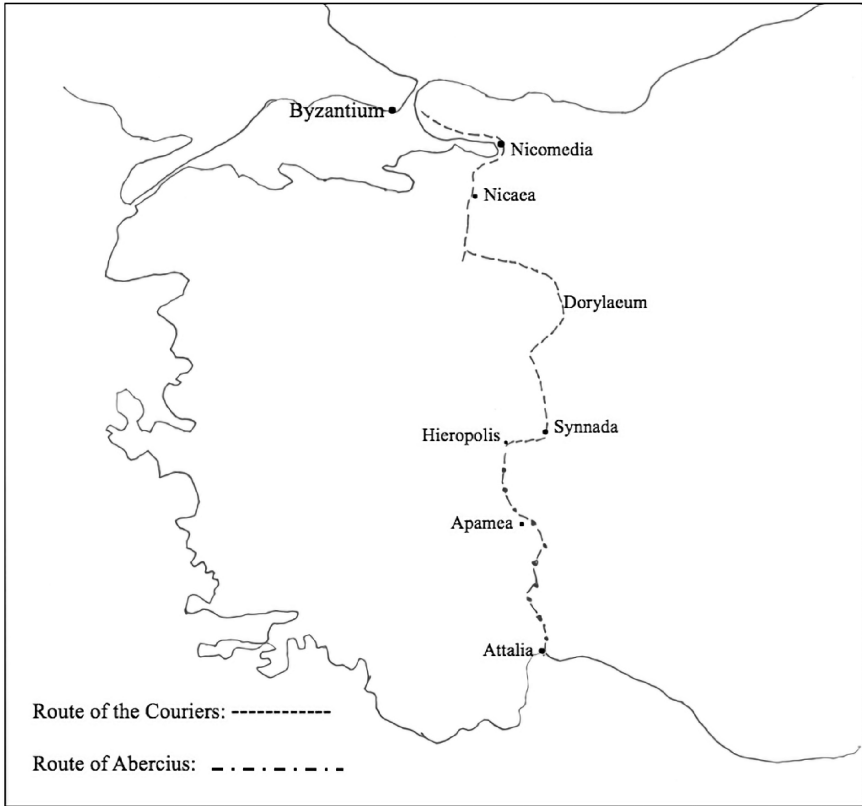


Figure 2.1 The journey of the couriers and Abercius in Asia

about 92 km) would have followed the estimation given in the *Life* of about a day, and the couriers could certainly have made the leg from Nicomedia through Dorylaion to Synnada in two days (see Figure 2.1).

From there, however, the route over the mountains using local roads (18 miles or about 29 km) would have taken them several more hours due to the rough terrain.

We are told that the governor of Synnada, Spinther, sent the couriers off with guides, and they arrived at their destination at the ninth hour on the same day (§51 *Chr.*). The road through the mountain pass was evidently good enough to allow travel by horse, for when the couriers arrive, they are mentioned as being on horseback (§53).

After their brief visit, Abercius and the couriers travel separately to Italy, Abercius telling them he would meet with them at Portus after forty days.<sup>68</sup> The couriers left ‘once again using state-owned horses’ (§54), and if they did return

via the same route, it would once again have taken them about four days to reach Byzantium. All we are told of their sea voyage back is that they reached Portus two days after the forty-day time period had lapsed ‘on account of the winter season’ (§57 *Epi.*) In other words, their return journey took at least twelve days longer than their journey east. The Christocentric version adds that they were ‘exceptionally apprehensive. . . . For it was now the winter solstice and they were very disheartened and distressed at the present circumstances’ (§57 *Chr.*). As Casson has pointed out, unfavorable winds and winter storms could substantially delay a traveler sailing from East to West.<sup>69</sup>

That Abercius, traveling at the same time from Hieropolis to Attalia by land, and thence to Portus by ship, had no such difficulties, was attributed to divine direction (§57 *Hag.*), and he arrived at Portus a day ahead.<sup>70</sup> He was either traveling by donkey (§55 *Chr.* καθεσθεις ἐπὶ πῶλον ὄνου) or by horse-cart (§55 *Epi.* ὀχήματος πωλικού επιβαίνει). In the Hagiocentric version, he rides on a donkey and has an additional one to carry his provisions (§55 *Hag.*). At some point along the way from Hieropolis to Attalia, he is joined by a vineyard-worker named Trophimion (§56), who evidently sails with him all the way to Rome. ‘Their entire journey was easy with the Lord directing, and they arrived at the place called Portus one day before that which had been arranged with the soldiers’ (§57 *Hag.*). Once at Portus, Abercius awaits the arrival of the couriers, who are overjoyed to find Abercius already there (§58), and they travel the short journey along the Via Ostiensis from Portus to Rome without incident.<sup>71</sup>

## Notes on geography

### *Hierapolis vs. Hieropolis*

The manuscript tradition of the *Life* is uniform in identifying the city of St. Abercius as ‘Hierapolis’. The miracle of the hot springs just outside the city of Hierapolis, recorded in the *Life* (§39–40), has quite logically led to the association of Abercius with the city of Hierapolis in the Lycus valley (modern-day Pamukkale), famous for its hot springs. However, reconciling the bishop lists of Hierapolis with what the *Life* tells us about Abercius’ tenure as bishop has long been seen as a problem. As Thurston notes:

The Church of Hierapolis, in Phrygia, was one of the most distinguished of those in Asia Minor . . . and the names of several of the early occupants of the see are known to us, more especially in the second century those of St. Papias and St. Apollinaris. Now the latter of these we are expressly told was made bishop in A.D. 171, and as Papias must have lived well on past the middle of the century, very little room is left for the episcopacy of St. Abercius, the more so as we learn from the *Acta* that he was not immediately succeeded by St. Apollinaris, but by another Abercius. Moreover, his journey to Rome cannot be placed earlier than the year 163, the year of Lucilla’s marriage to Verus.<sup>72</sup>