

,The wagon rests in winter, the sleigh in summer, the horse never'
Travelling on horseback from the perspective of urban mobility from Antiquity to the Middle
Ages

Fabienne Meiers, PhD-student in Medieval History under AFR-grant

Doctoral thesis: Mobility and traffic networks in the Late Middle Ages with special emphasis on equestrian traffic from
a comparative perspective

University of Luxembourg
Research Unit: IPSE
Campus Walferdange
Route de Diekirch
L-7220 Walferdange
LUXEMBOURG
fabienne.meiers@uni.lu

Travelling was a precarious venture in the past; it entailed a high personal, financial and logistical effort, which altered the perception of space considerably in contrast to modern times. Still, it was a necessity and allowed to promote and maintain political alliances and economic activities through a permanent communication exchange. Since the thriving of European cities in the High Middle Ages, there was an increasing demand for faster and more reliable exchange and communication services comparable with those in the Roman Empire. In consequence, traffic policies were developed which consisted of road works, institutionally controlled mounted courier services, travel allowances and the provision of travel horses. These measures facilitated urban mobility and interurban travels of delegations consisting of officials and citizens sent out in order to administrate the political communication.

Whereas, in antiquity, carriages still played an important role in travelling by land, this would change after the fall of the Roman Empire. The decline of the well-developed and regularly maintained road network and infrastructures made the conveyance of passengers in heavy un-sprung carts either impossible or less effective. In contrast, equestrian traffic gained more importance in the medieval period, especially in long-distance travels, a phenomenon that is not only reflected in pragmatic documents such as urban (travel) account books and legal texts, but also in literature and art: The use of travel horses performing specific soft gaits enhanced the performance of spatial mobility of the upper social classes significantly. These ambling horses known as *tolutarii* in the Roman world and as *palfreys*, *zelter* or *gradarii* in medieval sources became an indispensable modality for travelling as tirelessly, safely and quickly as in a sprung carriage in the Roman period. In the Late Middle Ages they also became available to the lower classes in urban horse rental stations.

So far, historical studies have only marginally dealt with the primary mechanisms that facilitated circulation between cities. An interdisciplinary and diachronic comparative approach, however, has demonstrated, that they were less likely an image of a neglected Roman road network, as has often been assumed in older research, but the expression of alternative and specialised systems developed to stimulate interurban mobility in more heterogeneous political and economic contexts than during the Roman period.