

DRAFT—NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION OR CITATION

Seeking Protection Along the Way: Ritualistic Behaviour Associated with Travel in the Ancient World

Michele Murray, Bishop's University

Travel in the ancient world was fraught with uncertainty because of the numerous dangers associated with such activity. Journeys along the roadways and seaways of the ancient Mediterranean were a necessary and unavoidable part of life, however, for many peoples of the Roman Empire. Because of the anxiety associated with travel, a significant number of travellers had particular rituals and behaviours that they performed before, during, and after their journeys, seemingly in order to obtain divine protection and guidance for their journeys. This behaviour reflects what modern psychologists refer to as “magical thinking” since these travellers evidently believed that they could directly affect the outcomes of their travels.¹ After a discussion of some of the dangers associated with ancient travel, this paper will outline some of the rituals practiced by travellers. It will be argued that studies by modern cognitive psychologists into the phenomenon referred to as “illusion of control” can provide insight into the ritualistic behaviours of the ancient traveller. As well, parallels will be drawn between what the ancients referred to as “superstitious” behaviour and the anxiety disorder known as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

Dangers of Travel by Sea

Many were the risks of traveling by sea. Of course, shipwreck was a potential danger, since the winds and their effect on the water could be unpredictable. Sailing was an activity largely limited to the summer months when the winds were mostly from the north, and the weather conditions were stable. After the middle of September sailing was considered dangerous due to poor visibility because of the combination of ever-diminishing daylight and increasing cloud cover, and after November it became treacherous because of the potential volatility and violence of storms (e.g., Pliny *Natural History* 2.122; Vegetius, *De re militari* 4. 39 cited in Meijer and Van Nijf. 1992:165). Winter sailing sometimes was undertaken in emergency situations, however, such as during the famine in Rome under the reign of Claudius; to compensate for the risk, the Emperor insured ship-owners against the loss of their vessels if they were willing to make the trip to deliver grain (Suet. *Claud* 18.2; trans. Graves).

The well-travelled Apostle Paul recites in his letters some of the hazards he experienced in his journeys, which included his being shipwrecked three times, and on one of these occasions he was adrift on the open sea “for a night and a day” (2 Cor. 11:25). Passenger ships simply did not exist in the ancient world, thus a traveller would have to board a trading vessel that was heading in the desired direction; sometimes this meant going from port to port if no ship was going all the way. Travellers seeking to voyage from Rome to Alexandria were luckier because they could make use of the large grain ships that

¹ Magical thinking is discussed more fully later in this paper.

provided first-rate passenger service between these two cities (Casson 1991: 209).² Josephus crossed the Mediterranean on one of these large carriers in 64 CE; he reports that six hundred fellow passengers were aboard (*The Life* 14), and all had to swim through the night when the ship foundered. While large ships may have been faster because they could keep to the open sea and did not need to stop as often as smaller vessels, even they were not impervious to accidents.

As if being shipwrecked were not bad enough, one was also at risk of being taken captive by those who took advantage of such disasters. For example, those living along the Coast watched for wrecks—and sometimes even set up false beacons in order to lure crafts to their ruin—and then sold their victims into slavery. A steward of Calvisius Sabinus was sold and branded a slave when he was captured after his vessel was shipwrecked (*Scribonius Largus* 90.231). Piracy was another possible danger to which travellers on ships could succumb. Those who were captured by pirates were enslaved or held for ransom, and some victims were killed (Moody 1920: 120). Augustus successfully lessened the frequency of piracy during his reign by establishing permanent war fleets in the navy bases of Ravenna and Misenum, and smaller flotillas in numerous other more minor harbours throughout the Empire, but it still could happen, particularly on the Black Sea and the Indian Ocean (Casson 1991; Moody 1920; Meijer and Van Nijf 1992: 177).³ As late as the fourth century CE, Church Father Ambrose warns: “God did not make the sea to be sailed over, but for the sake of the beauty of the element. The sea is tossed by storms; you ought, therefore, to fear it, not to use it.” (Ambrosius, *De Elia* 70-1; trans. Homes Dudden, cited in Meijer and Van Nijf. 1992: 20).

Some of the Rituals Practiced in Association with Sea Travel

In response to these dangers, sea travellers practiced different religious rituals in association with their journeys in the hopes of obtaining safety and security. Before embarking upon a ship, some type of sacrifice, prayer, or libation was offered to appease the winds and thereby gain a peaceful sea for travel. These actions could occur before leaving the harbour, or onboard the vessel itself during the voyage, particularly at points at which sacred protection was needed (Brody 2008: 449). The latter was possible since sacrificial altars could be built on the ship. For example, in a description of the impressively large Greek ship *Syracusia*, launched by the tyrant Hiero II of Syracuse in c. 240 BC, Athenaeus, a late 2nd-century Greek writer who quotes a detailed description of the "Syracusia" from an earlier and now lost writer, Moschion, mentions a chapel or altar to Aphrodite:

Alongside [the promenades] was a chapel to Aphrodite, three-couch size, whose floor was paved with agate and other of the

² Roman emperors also used this strategy; for example, Vespasian in 70 CE wished to return to Rome from Egypt and he did the first leg of his journey on a grain clipper, even though he could have chosen to travel on any vessel in the navy (Casson 1991: 209).

³ Strabo III.2.5, in what likely is rather an over-statement, nonetheless attests to the efficacy of Augustus: “Added to that [the regularity of the winds] is the peace nowadays, because all pirates are eliminated, and hence all sailors feel wholly at ease” (trans. Jones).

most decorative stones found on the island of Sicily. The bulkheads and overhead were of cypress, and the doors of ivory and aromatic cedar. It was beautifully fitted out with paintings, statues, and utensils for libations (Athenaeus V, 206d-209b: trans. Casson, cited in Meijer and Van Nijf. 1992: 155).

Sacrifices likewise were performed at the other end of journeys, to express gratitude for a safe arrival. On a relief dating to the early third century CE, a Roman commercial vessel entering the port is depicted with two men and one woman (Casson suggests it is “probably the captain, owner or charterer, and his wife”) on the afterdeck of the ship performing a sacrifice (Casson 1994: 157; Fig. 6). Moody points out that “[v]ows were made to Neptune, to Castor and Pollux, and to Venus Marina as well as to lesser divinities. It was the custom of some when starting on a voyage at night, to pay special adoration to the stars that they might guide aright the pilot of the ship” (1920: 79-80).⁴

Isis was one of the deities frequently associated with the sea and sailors. In an early second century CE list of her titles, she was known as the “fleet-commanding” goddess and the “bringer to harbour, guardian and guide of the seas, Lady of the mouths and rivers” who had “dominion over winds and thunders and lightnings”—crucial skills for a goddess worshiped by sailors (*P. Oxy xi.1380* in Kraemer 2004: 456). *The Kyme Aretalogy*, of the late-second, early-third century CE declares: “I am Isis...I devised business in the sea...I am the Queen of rivers and winds and sea...I am the Queen of the thunderbolt. I stir up the sea and I calm it...I am the Queen of seamanship. I make the navigable unnavigable when it pleases me” (*ibid.*: 457-458). Naming ships after her was considered auspicious. Sometime in the second century CE an enormous grain ship, deterred from its destination by bad weather, ended up in the Athenian port of Piraeus. Lucian describes the vessel with great enthusiasm: “And the way the stern rose up in a gradual curve ending in a gilded goose-head, matched at the other end by the forward, more flattened, sweep of the prow with its figures of Isis, the goddess the ship was named after, on each side!” (cited in Casson 1994: 159). In certain parts of the Mediterranean the sailing season was opened with the *Navigium Isidis*, a religious feast described, from the perspective of the goddess, in Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses* (XI.5) as “[t]he day which...has been proclaimed mine by everlasting religious observance; on that day, when the winter’s tempests are lulled and the ocean’s storm-blown waves are calmed, my priests dedicate an untried keel to the now navigable sea and consecrate it as the first fruits of voyaging.” The ceremonial rituals included the consecration of a ship by the chief priest:

He took a lighted torch, an egg, and sulphur, uttered prayers of great solemnity with reverent lips, and purified the ship thoroughly, naming it and dedicating it to the goddess. The gleaming sail of this holy barque bore an inscription woven in letters of gold, whose text renewed the prayer for prosperous navigation during the new sailing season...Then all the people,

⁴ The Dioscuri, twins Castor and Pollux, were perceived to have control over favourable winds, thus they were considered patrons of both Greek and Roman sailors who used the light from the constellation of the Dioscuri to navigate their ships at night (Brody 2008: 445).

worshippers and uninitiated alike, outdid one another in loading the ship with baskets heaped with spices and similar offerings, and on the waves they poured libations of grain-mash made with milk. When the ship was laden with generous gifts and auspicious sacrifices, it was untied from its anchor-ropes and offered to the sea, as a mild breeze arose especially for it. (Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* XI.16; trans. Graves)

Priapus, the Roman ithyphallic god typically associated with the blessing of gardens, may also have been a patron of military as well as merchant ships. A terracotta phallus was discovered on board a Roman shipwreck from the silted harbour at Pisa. Another was found “represented on the remains of a secondary ram from a Roman naval vessel excavated on the river Rhine, and a wooden figurine of Priapus was discovered in the remains of a wreckage of a Roman ship near Marseille” (Brody 2008: 449).

Jean-Marie André and Marie-Françoise Baslez (1993: 84) state that “The liquid element—especially the sea—considered unstable for divinatory signs, nourished superstition [la superstition].”⁵ Some of the rituals arising from such superstition included not cutting hair or nails while sailing during good weather (though if it turned bad, “nail clippings and locks could be tossed to the waves as an appeasement offering”), and soiling the sea with human waste. Parthian King Tiridates I took a circuitous route to Rome in order to avoid doing the latter (Pliny, *Letters*, XXX, 2; Tacitus, *Appendix to Book XVI of the Annals*). Suetonius reports that Augustus, furthermore, “thought it good luck to start a long journey or voyage during a drizzle of rain, which would ensure success and a speedy return;” this Emperor also “had a superstition against starting a journey on the day after a market-day” (*Augustus* 92; trans. Graves). Neither Augustus nor other Roman skippers “would leave a port on 24 August, 5 October, or 8 November, and the end of the month as a whole was considered no time to be found on the water” (Casson 1994: 155). Dancing during the voyage likewise was taboo, and if anyone died, the corpse was cast into the sea in quick order, since death aboard a ship was thought to be a distressingly bad omen (Brody 2008: 451; Casson 1994: 156). “Travellers honoured the gods of temples which were passed at sea and continued to believe that a god’s presence could attend the ship, guide it in a crisis or be seen, when the weather was rough, in the fire and clatter of a sea storm...At sea, the gods were always near, and in the fire of a storm, Castor and Pollux were unmistakable, ‘flaming amazement’ like Ariel on the prow” (Fox 1987: 118). Additional bad omens included sneezing as one boarded the gangplank (although sneezing to the right during the sacrifice prior to departure was considered a good omen); having a crow or a magpie sit and squawk among the rigging before departure (but if this happened *during* a voyage it was considered a good sign);

⁵ My translation. The English word “superstition” comes from the word *superstitio*, which is the Latin translation of the Greek term *deisidaimonia* (see Grodzynski 1974: 36-60). It is the term used to express disdain for “forms of religion and piety that Rome’s literate upper classes found excessive, comic, or dangerous,” and was likewise the term that “pagan writers and legislators favoured as a depiction of Judaism and Christianity. From the age of Constantine onwards Christian writers and legislators returned the favour by referring to pagan religion as *superstitio* or *deisidaimonia*” (Hodgson 1992: 240).

glimpsing wreckage on the shore...and a voyage could be put off altogether by dreams if a voyager or the ship's officers took them seriously— and many did (Casson 1994:155).⁶

Dangers of Travel by Land

Land travel likewise had its risks. Probably primary among them was the possibility of encountering thugs along one's way. Naturally, the poor were more at risk than the rich, as the latter tended to travel with larger retinues, which was useful for purposes of self-defence, although the wealthy certainly were an attractive target of highway robbers (Moody 1920: 81).⁷ Land travel also meant being vulnerable to the flash floods of *wadis* and rivers, and while Romans built many fine roadways, certain regions were so mountainous building more than narrow pathways simply was not possible. Strabo acknowledges how Augustus "put down the brigands" and "built up the roads as much as he possibly could," but "it was not everywhere possible to overcome nature by forcing a way through masses of rock and enormous beetling cliffs, which sometimes lay above the road and sometimes fell away beneath it" (Strabo IV.6.6; trans. Jones). As a result, reports Strabo, "if one made even a slight misstep out of the road, the peril was one from which there was no escape, since the fall reached to chasms abysmal. And at some places the road there is so narrow that it brings dizziness to all who travel it afoot—not only to men, but also to all beasts of burden that are unfamiliar with it" (Strabo IV.6.6; trans. Jones). These precipitous roadways were accessible to pedestrians and pack animals alone, and in the winter they were made all the more risky because of the possibility of slipping on snow or ice (Bruce 1992: 650).

Travellers along the roads also were exposed to danger when they stopped to rest from their journey and spent the night at an inn. Inns were notoriously unappealing places, in which primarily the poorest travellers stayed. They were noisy, in dilapidated condition, and were frequented by unsavoury characters. Innkeepers themselves had reputations for overcharging, stealing, and lying. Cicero ridiculed the idea that anyone should believe the sworn statement of an innkeeper (Mil. 24.65; Clu. 59.63; Inv. 2.4; Div 1.27.57). Inns furthermore were known for having wobbly beds in which fleas and bedbugs thrived. In the *Acts of John*, the writer describes an unusual encounter with bedbugs at a roadside inn:

But when [John] lay down he was troubled by the bugs, and as they continued to become yet more troublesome to him, when it

⁶ For example, "To dream of turbid waters or a key or an anchor was an unmistakable veto on travel by sea. Goats presaged big waves or storm—and terribly big, if the goats were black. Wild boars meant violent storms. So did bulls, and shipwreck if they gored. Owls and other night birds meant storm or pirate attack, gulls and other sea birds danger but not death. To dream that you saw your face on the moon meant destruction, to dream of flying on your back or walking on water were good omens. In general, encouraging dreams seem to have been far fewer than the other kind" (Casson 1994: 155-156).

⁷ Lincoln Blumell's 2005 paper for the CSBS Travel and Religion Seminar, "Beware of the Bandits! The Perils of Travel in the Early Roman Empire," discusses this issue thoroughly, thus my comments on this issue are kept to a minimum.

was now about the middle of the night, in the hearing of us all he said to them: “I say unto you, O bugs, behave yourselves, one and all, and leave your abode for this night and remain quiet in one place, and keep your distance from the servants of God.” And as we laughed, and went on talking for some time, John addressed himself to sleep; and we, talking low, gave him no disturbance (or, thanks to him we were not disturbed). 61 But when the day was now dawning I arose first, and with me Verus and Andronicus, and we saw at the door of the house which we had taken a great number of bugs standing, and while we wondered at the great sight of them, and all the brethren were roused up because of them, John continued sleeping. And when he was awaked we declared to him what we had seen. And he sat up on the bed and looked at them and said: “Since ye have well behaved yourselves in hearkening to my rebuke, come unto your place.” And when he had said this, and risen from the bed, the bugs running from the door hasted to the bed and climbed up by the legs thereof and disappeared into the joints (*Acts of John* 60-61).

No doubt many an ancient reader of this document dearly wished for such abilities.

Travel at night was particularly risky. For one thing, garbage from homes was disposed of by throwing it out of the window, every evening at sunset (Stacciolo 2003: 20). According to Juvenal, this lent an additional danger to walking along the roads at night: “It’s a long way up to the rooftops, and a falling tile can brain you...Each open upper casement along your route at night may prove a death-trap: so pray and hope (poor you!) that the local housewives drop nothing worse on your head than a pail full of slops” (Juvenal, *Satire III*, 275-276; trans. Graves).

Some of the Rituals associated with Road Travel

In order to alleviate some of the anxiety associated with travel by roads, Romans had particular behaviours that they practiced. It was believed, for example, that one ought to begin a journey with the right foot; and if one’s foot knocked against a door, or if one was tripped by one’s garment, it was best to defer travelling (André and Baslez 1993: 83). Amulets might be worn during travel; for example, because he was almost hit by lightning during a night march, Augustus “always carried a piece of seal-skin as an amulet,” and took cover in an underground vault during strong thunderstorms (*Augustus* 90).

In addition to the places for buying food and drink as well as the inns located along the roads, altars and holy shrines (*aediculae*), such as the Shrine of Vesta at the entrance to the House of the Virgins in the Roman Forum, or altars devoted to the *lares*, the guardian gods who defended the local neighbourhoods could be found. These were located “especially [on] the busiest [streets], or at crossroads and various other strategic points” (Stacciolo 2003: 23). Travellers seeking a safe arrival at their destinations were expected to stop and pay homage at these shrines, as Apuleius implies in his *Apology*. There, he

describes the behaviour of an impious man named Aemilianus (his accuser): not only had this person “never prayed to any god or frequented any temple,” Apuleius says that “if he chances to pass any shrine, he regards it as a crime to raise his hand to his lips in token of reverence” (*Apology* 56). He also describes further the various shrines found on roadsides: “an altar ringed with floral wreaths, a grotto shaded by leafy boughs, an oak adorned with horns, a beech crowned with skins, an isolated rock surrounded by an enclosure, a tree trunk carved into a human shape, a meadow filled with the smoke of libations, a stone drenched in perfumes” (Stacciolo 2003: 30). Votive offerings with inscriptions wishing travellers a safe outward journey (*salvos ire*) and return (*salvos venire*) were also present along the way (See Stacciolo 2003: 31, figures 17-18).

The Romans furthermore sought protection for their travels through engaging in a ritual that involved placing their feet into a set of footprints carved into stone (see Stacciolo 2003: 30, figure 16). The carved footprints—one set of which can be seen at the Ostia Museum—were accompanied by the inscription *pro ita et reditu*, “for the journey and return.” According to Nigel Pennick, the Romans “used them for protective rites of leaving on a journey and for thanksgiving for a safe return, when the traveller would place his or her feet in the footprints to mark the beginning or end of the undertaking” (1996: 40).⁸ Perhaps, as Steven Muir elaborates, the rite was such that “the traveler would invoke the god as he stood in the outward-bound footprints as he departed, and then thank the god as he stood in the inward-facing ones” (Muir 2005). Indeed, the traveller may have stood in *both* sets of footprints before his departure. This ritual may have had two powerful effects: by standing in the “returning” footprints, the traveller was acting out his safe return; he would have envisioned himself as having completed the journey upon which he was about to set out, and about which he was uncertain; by standing in *both* sets of footprints, he thereby symbolized his safe return; it was “set in stone,” so to speak.

Cognitive Psychology, Magical Thinking and Illusion of Control, and Rituals

The concept of “magical thinking” in recent decades has been taken up as a topic of study in different branches of psychology.⁹ Defined by psychologist Eugene Subbotsky as “the type of thinking that embraces the possibility that magical and other types of mental-physical causality can directly affect perceived or imagined objects,” in which mental-physical causality refers to “mental processes (wishing, thinking, casting magical spells) that produce direct effects on physical objects,” magical thinking was originally considered by developmental psychologists such as Jean Piaget to be an essential phase

⁸ I am grateful to Steven Muir for drawing my attention to these artefacts, which he discusses in his paper “Blest be the ties that bind – religion on the roads of ancient Greece and Rome,” presented under the title, “‘He talked to us on the road’ - Encountering the Divine While Traveling” as part of the Travel and Religion Seminar of 2005.

⁹ I would like to express my thanks to Mr. David Joubert-LeClerc, a recent graduate from Bishop’s University with an Honours in Religion, for introducing me to the insights offered by Psychology into magic and ritual through his work on his Honours thesis, “The Psychology of Magic.”

in the intellectual development of children (Vyse 1997: 146-157).¹⁰ Recent studies have suggested, however, that magical thinking is present in normal adults (Subbotsky 2005: 301-318). Psychological studies suggest that magical thinking is the result of cognitive mechanisms such as the phenomenon of “illusion of control,” and it will be argued that understanding the illusory control mechanism provides insight into the ritual behaviours associated with ancient travel described above.

When an individual infers that he or she has influenced the outcome of what are in fact random proceedings, this is called the illusion of control mechanism. In some of the earliest experiments on illusion of control, psychologists Ellen J. Langer and Jane Roth observed that the human tendency to misunderstand randomness can lead to the perception that one controls a situation that in fact is purely the result of chance (1975: 951-955). In their study, Langer and Roth asked subjects to predict the result of coin tosses, and after each prediction, the experimenter would reveal whether the prediction was correct or not. For some of the subjects, the feedback from experimenters was actually a predetermined sequence of results. Interestingly, in a questionnaire filled out after the experiment, subjects who had been given feedback in which there were more accurate predictions in the first tosses tended to attribute their success more to their own skill than other subjects did.¹¹ They furthermore saw themselves as significantly better at the task, recollected more successes, and expected greater success in future experimental trials than did other subjects. Earlier experiments established that subjects consistently tend to ascribe their successes to themselves, and their failures to chance or other external factors (DeCharms 1968: 269; Lefcourt 1973: 417-425; White 1959: 297-333 cited in Langer and Roth 1975: 952). If skill-related components such as “competition, choice, passive involvement (thinking about the event in order to come upon successful strategies), active involvement, stimulus familiarity (knowledge about the object to be controlled), and response familiarity (practice) were introduced into chance settings where they did not objectively influence the outcome...these factors appeared to be effective in inducing a skill orientation” (*ibid.*: 951). Langer and Roth contend that this impulse to see events as controllable is so intense that even when it comes to interpreting events as random as coin tosses, when initial success is experienced, an illusion of control is produced and subjects attribute the cause of their success to themselves rather than to chance. Thus, even in cases where success is totally random, as long as the initial exposure to the task is positive the human mind has an innate tendency to attribute success to itself.

The illusion of control tends to be prompted especially in situations of high stress. In a set of experiments conducted by Nehemia Friedland, Giora Keinan and Yechiela Regev, subjects could choose to predict the outcome of a chance situation either before or after it

¹⁰ Later developmental psychologists confirmed Piaget’s contention that children tended towards magical thinking, e.g., Vikan and Clausen (1993: 297-314); Woolley *et al.* (1999: 571-587); Markman (2004: 456-468).

¹¹ “Apparently a skill attribution is determined early in a sequence of outcomes. After the attribution is made, outcomes inconsistent with it are not given much weight. An early, fairly consistent pattern of successes leads to a skill attribution, which in turn leads subjects to expect future success” (Langer and Roth 1975: 954).

occurred (in the latter case the result was still hidden from the participant) (1992: 923-931). The experiment revealed that subjects who were exposed to stress chose to predict (rather than postdict) in higher numbers than other subjects. Likewise, when facing chance situations, subjects with higher levels of stress would also significantly tend to choose situations that contained active involvement over situations that did not, even if they statistically diminished their chances to succeed by doing so.¹² Thus, stress raised the desire in subjects to predict rather than postdict, and to be actively involved (e.g., by using the brake to stop the roulette wheel, [see footnote 10]) rather than taking a passive position. Friedland *et al.* conclude: “Faced with a trade-off between actual control and a subjective sense of control, stressed subjects were inclined to prefer an option that promoted the latter” (1992: 928). While stress may have distorted the difference between a sense of control and actual control, thereby prompting the irrational belief that the break “could be used to shape a threatening environment to one’s advantage,” the explanation that the authors of the study prefer is drawn from the observation that an individual’s attention is narrowed and his or her focus turns inward under stress (Anderson 1976; Vroom 1964 cited in Friedland *et al.* 1972: 929).

The concrete result of this tendency is that people who are stressed are more aware of their anxiety and emotions than they are to the task at hand, and consequently they prefer to deal with the emotional discomfort associated with stress instead of dealing with the stimulus or stressor that caused the emotions. “To the extent that a general sense of control and mastery alleviates stress, responses that have the trappings of control, for example, responses that entail activity and personal involvement, might be preferred to responses that are less readily associated with the exercise of control, even if the actual

¹² In the second experiment of Friedland *et al.*, the subject was to stand at the back of a roulette, which consisted of a free-spinning, 24-cm-diameter wheel on a 40-cm-high pole; the front of the wheel was divided into two sections: a 140 degree section was painted blue and a 220 degree section was painted red. The back of the wheel was painted white. A 20-cm-long brake lever protruded out of the back of the wheel, and by pressing this lever, the spinning would rapidly stop. The subject was to gamble on whether the roulette wheel would stop on the red or on the blue section, and was offered two choices: one option was to use the brake to stop the wheel and the other was to wait for the wheel to stop turning on its own. The latter option allowed the subject the liberty of gambling on the blue or on the red section, whereas if the subject opted to use the brake, the subject was forced to gamble on the narrower blue section only. Subjects in the “high stress” condition were told that two electrodes would be attached to the nondominant hand and that a harmless but painful electric shock would be felt when they failed to guess correctly. Subjects in the “low stress” condition were not threatened with electric shocks. The results were as follows: in the low stress condition, most of the subjects did NOT use the brake, and thereby maximized their chances of success; more subjects in the “high stress” condition chose to use the brake, which was the riskier option, than the safer option that meant relinquishing this “device of illusory control” (1992: 926). Indeed, as the authors explain: “By foregoing the use of the brake, and instead gambling on the red (220 degree) section, the subject had an almost 1.6 times better chance of avoiding the electric shock. However, with respect to the subjective sense and perception of control, the opposite may have held true: The active, hands-on manipulation of the brake lever could be perceived more readily as an exercise of control and contribute more to a generalized feeling of control than the alternative that entailed the passive entrusting of one’s fate to the laws of chance” (1992: 928).

control gained by the former is illusory” (*ibid.*: 929). The authors do not mean to suggest that a person actually weighs the two options consciously, but instead that “stressed persons’ emotion-focused coping attempts block out or lower the salience of task-relevant considerations” (*ibid.*: 929). Thus, “control that is wholly illusory in terms of its impact on environmental conditions producing stress *might have a very real effect on the regulation of emotional distress*” (*ibid.*: 929, my emphasis).

Psychological research provides abundant evidence for the significance of perceived personal control; in particular, in situations when personal control is either threatened or undermined, individuals “are driven to protect it or to regain it” (*ibid.*: 923; Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder 1982 cited in *ibid.*: 923). Personality traits such as “locus of control” also are considered factors in the tendency towards magical thinking in individuals. People with an *internal* locus of control tend to perceive themselves as controlling events in their life, whereas those with an *external* locus of control are more likely to view outside events and other people as primary influences in their lives (Rotter 1971: 37-42, 58-59). In the study of Friedland *et al.* it was those with internal loci of control that displayed behaviour associated with magical thinking, independent of the level of stress that they were exposed to. The combination that induced the strongest manifestations of illusion of control was that of high stress and internal locus of control. This suggests that some persons may be more liable to engage in magical thinking than others.¹³

It is perhaps the need to assert personal control in a situation of great uncertainty, such as travel, that prompted people in the ancient world to engage in the ritualistic behaviour associated with journeying. Travel was an activity full of insecurity because of its many potential dangers (discussed above). It was, therefore, an activity that induced a high level of stress in ancient travellers (modern ones too!). Starting a journey on the right foot, or stepping into footprints of stone, or offering a libation prior to leaving the harbour on a ship, did not directly affect the outcome of the trip. But this behaviour consisted of an individual’s taking action and personally getting involved, thus it bore the “trappings of control” (to borrow a phrase from Friedland *et al.*) that probably contributed to a sense of personal control (illusory as it may have been), and might have had the *actual* effect of regulating the considerable emotional discomfort associated with travelling in the ancient world.

Not Too Much Ritual, Though...

There was a limit, however, when it came to ritualized behaviour—particularly from the point of view of the elite Roman. Too *much* ritualizing was viewed as pathetic, laughable behaviour. Wearing the gods down (*fatigare deos*) through incessant prayer, and other behaviour, was not appropriate behaviour for the free Roman citizen. If he or she was

¹³ This is a point made by Joubert-Leclerc (2009: 32). A psychological mechanism such as illusion of control is not believed by psychologist to exist in a certain portion of the general population, but in just about everyone. Indeed, it seems probable that cognitive biases are artefacts of problem-solving mechanisms developed throughout human evolution, and they would be, therefore, be universal (Haselton, Nettle and Andrews 2005: 724-746).

truly pious, such an individual would “think of the gods as benevolent, just, and providential” (Veyne 1987: 211), and would know that they “respected the social code of the city: so long as they were not gravely offended and the city institutions continued to function, the gods were not expected to take direct revenge or to heap disasters upon weak human beings” (Sheid 2003: 23). Those who relentlessly quivered with fear before the gods (*deisidaimonia*) were what the Romans meant by “superstitious” people. Superstitious people “thought that the gods were evil, jealous and tyrannical and...[t]his ‘ill-controlled fear’ of the immortals drove them to all kinds of excesses, in particular to slavish forms of behaviour designed to win the favour of the gods” (*ibid.*: 23). Anxiety-provoking occurrences in life, such as illness, childbirth, *and travel*, “were occasions to prove one’s loyal confidence in one’s protector...Not all men (*sic*) achieved this” (Veyne 1987: 212), as we shall see.

In Theophrastus’ fourth-century BCE character sketch entitled “Portrait of the Superstitious Person,” he describes a person who exudes, as the author himself says, an “exaggerated fear of supernatural powers.” At several points, Theophrastus seems to describe behaviour prompted by fears pertaining to travel, which I have highlighted in bold:¹⁴

The Superstitious man is one who will wash his hands at a fountain, sprinkle himself from a temple-font, put a bit of laurel-leaf into his mouth, and so go about the day. If a weasel run across his path, he will not pursue his walk until someone else has traversed the road, or until he has thrown three stones across it. When he sees a serpent in his house, if it be the red snake, he will invoke Sabazius, — if the sacred snake, he will straightway place a shrine on the spot. **He will pour oil from his flask on the smooth stones at the cross-roads, as he goes by, and will fall on his knees and worship them before he departs.** If a mouse gnaws through a meal-bag, he will go to the expounder of sacred law and ask what is to be done; and, if the answer is, “give it to a cobbler to stitch up,” he will disregard the counsel, and go his way, and expiate the omen by sacrifice. He is apt, also, to purify his house frequently, alleging that Hecate has been brought into it by spells; and, **if an owl is startled by him in his walk, he will exclaim “Glory be to Athene!” before he proceeds. He will not tread upon a tombstone, or come near a dead body or a woman defiled by childbirth, saying that it is expedient for him not to be polluted.** Also on the fourth and seventh days of each month he will order his servants to mull wine, and go out and buy myrtle-wreaths, frankincense, and smilax; and, on coming in, will spend the day in crowning the Hermaphrodites. When he has seen a vision, he will go to the interpreters of dreams, the seers, the augurs, to ask them to what god or goddess he ought to pray. Every month he will repair to the priests of the Orphic Mysteries, to partake in their rites, accompanied by his wife, or (if she is too busy) by his children and their nurse. He would seem, too, to be of those who are scrupulous in sprinkling themselves with sea-water; and, **if ever he observes anyone feasting on the garlic at the cross-roads, he will go away, pour water over his head, and, summoning the priestesses, bid them carry a squill¹⁵ or a puppy around him for purification.** And, if he sees a maniac or an epileptic man, he will shudder and spit into his bosom. (trans. Jebb)

¹⁴ Steven Muir likewise notes this in his paper.

¹⁵ A squill is a bulbous seashore plant that is sometimes called a “water onion.”

This is a satirical caricature of a man who is, from the perspective of the author, excessively fearful of the gods. To be sure, there were concrete dangers associated with travel in the ancient world, but this individual is perceived by Theophrastus to be exceedingly afraid and therefore over-indulges in ritualistic behaviours.

The manner in which this “superstitious” man obsesses over his state of purity and compulsively engages in ritual behaviour has parallels with behaviour associated with individuals with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Such people experience an urge, for example, to wash their hands incessantly (often until they are raw), or to check repeatedly that they turned off the stove, or to perform intricate chains of seemingly meaningless actions before they are able to leave their home. “Many afflicted with OCD realize how irrational their compulsion is, but they also feel that they cannot help it. It is quite beyond them to stop doing all this. Indeed, the very thought of not carrying out the exact sequence can fill them with anguish” (Boyer 2001: 238).

Many scholars have perceived the similarities between the compulsions associated with OCD and some ritual acts, but the discussion has become more fruitful recently because the neuropsychology of OCD is better understood. The disorder does not occur from “an arbitrary combination of fear and strange concepts. It comes from a specific disorder in the brain’s planning functions and responds rather well to medication. The condition is associated with abnormal activation of particular brain areas that mediate the combination of plans and emotions. Some of these areas are generally involved in producing emotional responses to possible as well as actual situations” (*ibid.*: 239). In the same way that superstition, as defined in the ancient world was, one could say, too much of an ostensibly beneficial thing (i.e., respect for the gods), in OCD the functional processes that provide human beings with the essential ability to be aware of possible danger in their midst are over-active.¹⁶ As Boyer states, “It is not entirely clear how the abnormal activation of such systems takes place in those with OCD; but the discoveries of neuro-imagery and physiology suggest that OCD may result from a slight distortion of normal brain functioning” (*ibid.*: 239). This is not to suggest that the commonalities mean that rituals are necessarily obsessive behaviours, “[b]ut they suggest that some elements of rituals trigger activation of those particular mental systems that work in overdrive, as it were, in obsessive disorders” (*ibid.*: 240).

¹⁶ Plutarch also discusses the superstitious person; in fact, in his writing, he compares two types of persons who are, from his point of view, unfortunate: the atheist and the superstitious person. In Plutarch’s opinion, the superstitious man is in a worse position than the atheist; Plutarch astutely describes the anguish associated with the obsessive ritualization and constant sense of uncertainty and fear experienced by the “superstitious” person. This description, too, sounds very much like a portrait of an individual with OCD. Due to constraints of time and space, I have chosen to discuss only Theophrastus’s character sketch. After I had already begun to draw these parallels between Theophrastus’s portrait of a superstitious person and the compulsive behaviour associated with OCD, I came across *The Religion of Fools: Superstition Past and Present* (2008), in which Hugh Bowden, in his article “Before Superstition and After: Theophrastus and Plutarch on *Deisidaimonia*,” 56-71, draws precisely the same parallels!

Travel in the ancient world was fraught with uncertainty because of the numerous dangers associated with it, and this uncertainty prompted anxiety and high levels of stress. As a result, travellers engaged in numerous rituals, probably in an attempt to regain a sense of personal control through active participation, and such behaviour probably contributed towards the diminishment of their sense of emotional distress arising from feelings of helplessness and uncertainty. The malady of OCD may not have been known as such in the ancient world, but very likely among those people who stood out to Theophrastus (and others) because of their obsessive ritual behaviours due to their excessive fear of the gods were some individuals who suffered from this particular disorder.

Discussions by scholars of religion of ritual practices—be they described as religious, magical, or superstitious rituals—have tended to centre on the sociological aspects and affects of these behaviours. Such studies have contributed a great deal to our understanding of how ritual practices impacted, and in turn were shaped by, ancient societies. Psychological considerations have not been applied to these issues in the same measure as the sociological, but this is changing.¹⁷ Advances in cognitive psychology and increasing interest in applying this knowledge to religion are contributing to this change. It is hoped that this paper's application of cognitive psychologists' knowledge of the illusion of control and obsessive-compulsive disorder has shed some insight into the ritualistic behaviours of the ancient traveller.

¹⁷ Studies such as those by Pascal Boyer (2001) as well as the monograph by Ilkka Pyysiäinen, *How Religion Works: Towards a New Cognitive Science of Religion* (2003) are products of this growing interest.