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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Writing Imperial Space in Letters

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Abstract

The fabric of the Roman empire was held together by a dense web of communications. Letters, often concerned with themes of connection and separation, played a significant role in the cultural construction of Roman imperial space. As material texts composed in one place and read in another perhaps far distant one, letters contributed to an understanding of imperial space articulated in terms of points on an itinerary, whose separation might be grasped in terms of time, as much as spatial distance. Strikingly ancient Roman letters almost never disclose an interest in the quality of places beyond Italy. Often letters work to efface the distance separating writer and addressee. In more formal letters little reference is made to distance, while letters between intimates frequently reflect on the capacity of this form of communication to transcend separation. What are the implications of this for conceptions of the empire's space? Cicero's letters are the primary focus of this discussion, which also touches on the letters of Seneca and Pliny and on Ovid's exile poetry.

Keywords: epistolarity; spatial networks; Cicero's letters; empire; separation

The philosopher Seneca, writing in the early 60s CE, evokes vividly the excitement generated by the imminent arrival of letters:

> Suddenly there came into our view to-day the 'Alexandrian' ships, – I mean those which are usually sent ahead to announce the coming of the fleet; they are called 'mail-boats' [*tabellarias*]. The Campanians are glad to see them; all the rabble [*turba*] of Puteoli stand on the docks, and can recognize the 'Alexandrian' boats, no matter how great the crowd of vessels, by the very trim of their sails ...
>
> While everybody was bustling about and hurrying to the water-front, I felt great pleasure in my laziness, because, although I was soon to receive letters from my friends, I was in no hurry to know how my affairs were progressing abroad, or what news the letters were bringing; for some time now I have had no losses, nor gains either.
>
> Sen. *Ep.* 77.1–3[1]

[1]Translations are adapted from the Loeb edition, unless otherwise indicated.

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It is a significant measure of Seneca's philosophical progress towards Stoic detachment that he is, it seems, not rushing down to join the crowds in the Puteoli docks in the hope of receiving a letter – a suggestive hint that the expectation of a letter was not confined to a small elite. Indeed, surviving papyri make clear the importance of communication by letter to many in the Roman empire.[2] An especially engaging – and to the point – letter of the second century CE made the return journey from Puteoli to Alexandria (and on to Oxyrhynchus):

> Greetings from Antonius to his dearest Dionysius.
>
> As soon as I stepped upon Italy's shores I felt compelled to let you know that my family and I are in good health. The sailing was slow, but it wasn't a difficult trip, and my poor little body suffered none of the trouble one usually expects, especially with those travelling for the first time
>
> SECOND HAND: ...
> THIRD HAND Written in Puteoli, Pauni 4
> ON REVERSE To Dionysius, steward, from Antonius, son of Ptolemaeus
>
> *P.Oxy.* 2191

This scrap of papyrus, transported back to Oxyrhynchus, conveys a sense of intimacy, a hint at the physical experience of travelling, reassurance concerning the health of the sender and his family (a perennial concern of letter writing) and confirmation that the destination has been reached.[3] Puteoli, one of the chief ports of Italy, was the usual arrival point for those travelling from Egypt.[4] This bustling hub was full of individuals whose origins were elsewhere, who wanted (perhaps more intently than Seneca) to stay in touch with those they had left behind.[5]

The Roman empire depended for its functioning on a complex infrastructure of roads and shipping routes, an intensified interconnectivity across the Mediterranean region and beyond (suggestively explored in recent years, notably by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell).[6] The empire was also dependent on the huge volume of written communication which circulated via these networks. As Dan-el Padilla Peralta puts it, 'Cicero's epistolary exchanges are the tip of an ice-berg: public and private correspondence during the Hellenistic and Roman periods was crucial to the co-ordination of commerce and politics; ... Among the most valuable cargoes speeding across the Roman Mediterranean were words themselves.'[7] Letters were the life blood of imperial bureaucracy.[8] The personal networks on which individual politicians depended were

[2]On the role of letters in maintaining social networks, see e.g. Adams (2016) on Roman Egypt and Speidel (2018) on Roman soldiers' letters from Nubia. Cugusi (1998) notes motifs common to both documentary and literary letters.

[3]Discussed by Adams (2001) 150; his translation.

[4]On variable journey times between Alexandria and Puteoli, see Salway (2004) 48–50.

[5]Horden and Purcell (2000) 377–400 emphasise the high level of mobility in the Roman empire. See further Adams (2001), de Ligt and Tacoma (2016).

[6]Horden and Purcell (2000) esp. 123–72, 342–400. On Roman transport infrastructure, see Adams and Laurence (2001), Talbert and Brodersen (2004), Adams (2012).

[7]Padilla Peralta (2018) 263–4.

[8]Millar (2004b), Corcoran (2014), Kolb (2000).

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maintained – and performatively demonstrated – through correspondence. Letters enabled individuals, stationed far from home for long periods, or separated for other reasons, to sustain relationships with distant friends and family.

Janet Altman's study of epistolarity, which she characterises as the use of epistolary form to convey meaning, highlights the role of the letter in emphasising either the closeness or the distance between sender and addressee.[9] Her work is concerned primarily with epistolary fiction but many of her observations have a bearing on 'genuine' letters.[10] The letter's power to bring sender and addressee together is a quality often emphasised, for instance, in Cicero's letters to Atticus. But the letter can sometimes serve to underline the physical distance that separates them, the yawning gulf between one location and other.[11] Letters connected not just people but also places. My purpose in what follows is to reflect on the complex ways in which the writing and transmission of letters in the Roman empire served to mediate the empire's space. What role might letters have played in generating a sense of the empire's extent, of its individual regions, as spatial entities or indeed as places? My focus will be on literary letters but we should not forget the vast numbers of documentary ones, whose engagement with imperial space was often implicit rather than explicit.

Some key aspects of spatial theory might be productively applied to the sense of space generated by Roman epistolary texts. Sociologist Manuel Castells characterises space as essentially a social relation. As Castells underlines, socio-spatial networks, while they have become far more intense in the digital era, have a long history.[12] We could see the letters of Cicero and his correspondents as serving to articulate links in a web of interconnected social networks.[13] The specific nature of communications, as Castells underlines, plays a critical role in defining space. Indeed, epistolary communication has profoundly informed the development and maintenance of numerous empires.[14] More generally the articulation of far-reaching networks through epistolary means has in many societies served to sustain family (and other) connections, when individuals are separated for significant periods of time. Such networks might be far flung, even enabling new links to develop between individuals not personally known to one another, as sometimes in the philosophical and religious virtual communities which developed across the Mediterranean from the Hellenistic period.[15] We might think, too, of the early modern development of a Republic of Letters, an intellectual community sustained across national borders by correspondence.[16]

[9]Altman (1982) 13.

[10]Even if the distinction between the genuine and the fictive is less clear-cut than might first appear. See Trapp (2003), De Pretis (2003), and Jackson and Soldo (2023).

[11]See Gavoille (2000) on the dialectic of presence/absence in the letters of Cicero. Edwards (2018a) explores Seneca's deployment of this trope in his letters.

[12]Castells (1996) esp. ch. 1.

[13]Radil and Walther (2019) offer productive insights into implications of the spatial metaphor of the network.

[14]Fundamental here in relation to communication and empire is Innis (1950).

[15]For the relationship between letter-writing and communities in antiquity, see Ceccarelli, Doering, Fögen, and Gildenhard (2018).

[16]Brilliantly articulated in digital form through a major research project at Stanford: http://republicofletters.stanford.edu. The case study on Voltaire, for instance, offers a visualisation of the locations of his correspondents (and his own location) over time.

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The ways in which, within a capitalist system, modern technologies of communication generate space-time compression have been highlighted in David Harvey's influential work;[17] a key feature of modernity is the capacity of actors to interact in real time, to share the same time, while not in the same place.[18] Modern information technology allows the generation of a shared space ('the space of flows'), enabling social actors in different places to share time. The technology of ancient letter-writing did not, of course, permit correspondents to share the same actual time when in different places. Within the Roman empire, letter-writers often show themselves fully alert to the time taken (sometimes painfully long) for letters to travel from one place to another. Yet the frequency with which letters arrived, the immediacy of their literary texture, might sometimes (though by no means always) serve to efface or at least significantly mitigate distance, creating a kind of virtual time-space.[19] Contributing to this mitigation, even perhaps erasure, of distance, I shall argue, is the way in which specificity of place is treated (or rather glossed over) in letters by Cicero and other elite Romans, too, at least when they travelled beyond Italy. With certain very particular exceptions (most notably Athens), places beyond Italy are surprisingly invisible in the letters elite Romans wrote to one another. While the variegated space of empire may be showcased in some other literary genres, letters, I shall argue, serve ultimately not to highlight but to shrink the vast space of empire

Mapping Cicero's network

By some considerable margin, Cicero is the classical Roman world's best attested letter-writer. Celebrated in antiquity for his consummate skill in letter-writing, Cicero was regarded as a model in this respect (as in others) by later generations. Cicero, then, is hardly a typical Roman letter-writer. Yet aspects of his practice must to some degree be representative of what was expected for those of his station.[20] Cicero wrote from Italy and from the province he governed, Cilicia (in what is now south-eastern Türkiye), to provincial governors and other prominent individuals in Achaea, Sicily, Transalpine Gaul, Bithynia, Asia, Cyprus and elsewhere; the geographical spread of his addressees is especially evident in Book 13 of the *Ad familiares*, which brings together a large number of letters of recommendation.[21] He writes to his friend Plancus, for instance, when the latter is legate in Africa under Caesar in 46 BCE (*Fam.* 13.29 = SB 282) and numerous letters are addressed to Servius Sulpicius Rufus, when Rufus is proconsul of Achaea, also in 46 BCE (*Fam.* 13.19–28).[22] Earlier, Cicero writes to his brother, when Quintus Cicero is propraetor of the province of Asia (in 61 to 59 BCE, *Ad Q. fr.* 1.1–2 [SB 1–2]), when he is stationed in Sardinia (in 57–56 BCE serving under Pompey, *Ad Q. fr.* 2.1–7 [SB 5–11]), and, subsequently (54 BCE), in Britain and Gaul with Julius Caesar (*Ad Q. fr.* 2.13–16 [SB 17–20], 3.1–7 [SB 21–7]).

[17]Harvey (1990).
[18]As Castells (1996) underlines.
[19]Cf. Henderson (2007) on the shared virtual space of letters between Cicero and his brother.
[20]On letter-writing practice in general in this period, see White (2010).
[21]On Book 13 see Cotton (1985), Rees (2007).
[22]SB 285–94.

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Cicero writes to his friend and most frequent correspondent Atticus when the latter is in Greece (a place with which his cognomen identifies him)[23] and Asia Minor – as well as when he is back in Rome, while Cicero himself is in exile.[24] Journeys from one place to another sometimes obtrude in the letters themselves; Cicero in autumn 54 is anxious at the prospect that Atticus may travel to Asia (4.16.9 = SB 89).[25] Atticus' letters later arrive sent en route from, for instance, Ephesus (*Att*. 4.18.5 = SB 92); another letter apparently gave details of Atticus's relatively pleasant voyage back to Buthrotum (*Att*. 4.19.1 = SB 93). Cicero is reassured to know that Atticus has made it safely to his home there: *O exspectatas mihi tuas litteras! O gratum aduentum! … o nauigationem amandam! Quam mehercule ago valde timebam recordans superioris tuae transmissionis δέρρεις*. 'At last the letter I have been longing for! Delighted to hear you are back! … And what a lovely voyage! I was really nervous about that I assure you, remembering those tarpaulins on your last crossing.' We too easily forget, perhaps, the hazardous nature of sea travel in the ancient Mediterranean, even in the relatively peaceful context of the Roman empire.[26]

The most basic function of the letter was often to confirm the location of the sender – as well as the state of their health. When Atticus is travelling around, though Cicero would rather have longer letters, he is at least comforted by frequent updates reporting on his friend's location and well-being (*Att*. 4.16.1 [SB 89]). Cicero's voluminous, if patchy, letter collection yields a detailed personal geography of his own movements – he writes from Arpinum,[27] Tusculum,[28] Antium,[29] Formiae,[30] Rome (the vast majority of letters) – as well as, wretchedly, during the vagabond sixteen months of exile (58–57 BCE), shifting between Brundisium,[31] Thessalonica,[32] Dyrrachium,[33] and elsewhere.[34] On his way out to Cilicia (where he was governor from 51 to 50 BCE), Cicero writes to Atticus from a number of locations along the way (we shall return later to this journey). Rome, we should note, is Cicero's default location; it is when he is away from Rome – and particularly when he is on the move – that Cicero tends to specify where he is writing from.[35] Sometimes the place of writing is signalled in an adscription.[36]

[23]Though Atticus is not addressed by his cognomen until 50 BCE (6.1.20 = SB 115).

[24]See Cappello (2016) on Atticus.

[25]Cf. 4.15.2 (= SB 90); 4.17.2 (= SB 91). On anxiety about Atticus' location as a leitmotif of the collection, see Bernard (2013) 37 and Cappello (2016) 470.

[26]When it suited his purposes, however, Cicero was ready to minimise the difficulty and danger of maritime transport. In a speech of 56 BCE, he asserted that Pompey's defeat of the pirates had fostered a system of maritime routes which brought the Mediterranean together 'as if it were a single harbour in the control of the Roman people' (*Prov. Cons*. 31). See Adams (2012) 225.

[27]E.g. *Att*. 4.7 (= SB 77).

[28]E.g. *Att*. 1.10 (= SB 6).

[29]E.g. *Att*. 2. 4, 2.5, 2.6 (including comments on the delights of Antium as a place), 2.7, 2.8, 2.9 (= SB 24–29).

[30]E.g. *Att*. 8.16 (= 166 SB).

[31]E.g. *Att*. 3.7 (= SB 52).

[32]E.g. *Att*. 3.10–21 (= SB 55–66).

[33]E.g. *Att*. 3. 22–5 (= SB 67–70).

[34]Details of the journey are discussed in Shackleton Bailey (1965), vol. 2, appendix 1, pp.227–32. See Beard (2002) on the character of Cicero's letters from exile.

[35]Rossi (2010: 57, 72) draws attention to Cicero's tendency not to specify his location when he is in Rome.

[36]Though adscriptions indicating date and place of dispatch have not always survived in the MSS tradition. In the case of *Fam*. Book 13, they seem to have been eliminated by the editor. See Rossi (2010) 56.

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Alternatively, Cicero includes phrases within the text of the letter (usually near the beginning or end) making clear when and/or from where he is writing, as for instance at *Att.* 4.9.2 (= SB 85), where he makes clear he is writing from Naples on 27 April, about to set off for Pompeii.[37]

'The exchange of letters always revolves around the temporal distance that separates writing and receipt', as Mary Beard observes.[38] Correspondence might be rapidly exchanged when those writing were geographically close. At Antium, speedily delivered letters leave Cicero feeling well informed (for instance, *Att.* 13.18 [SB 325]: *tanta erit crebritas litterarum*, 'letters passed to and fro so rapidly'), generating what might almost seem a shared space. But even in Formiae communications are less good (*Att.* 2.10 [SB 32]). Sometimes letters took a long time to arrive or went astray altogether. Cicero, in exile, writes to Atticus, 'It is 30 whole days since I last heard from you!' (*Att.* 3.21 [SB 66]).[39] As Bianca-Jeanette Schröder emphasises, Cicero made use of a variety of couriers even in one epistolary relationship (his correspondence with Atticus); sometimes these individuals had to travel a great distance. The course of the journey was not just evidenced by the battered, smudged nature of a package dispatched perhaps weeks previously – but also reported by its bearer, who could offer an eyewitness account; 'the courier was a living paratext', as Schröder remarks.[40]

By the late republic the Roman concept of *imperium* had certainly shifted from being primarily task-oriented, that is to say the power held by a consul or praetor, who might have command of a particular military campaign or other responsibility as his *provincia*.[41] Well before the time of Augustus, a more spatially oriented understanding of the extent of Rome's rule was becoming established – though visual representations of the empire's space displayed within the city of Rome are a particular feature of the Augustan period.[42] According to the Elder Pliny, a map was put on display 'to show the world to the city' in the Porticus Vipsania in Rome by Augustus' associate Agrippa (*NH* 3.16–17). Exactly what form this took remains debated.[43]

Certainly the vast space of the Roman world was understood by those who lived in it, for the most part, in terms of itineraries, the journeys made by people (and by goods), across the sea, along rivers and by land, that is to say imperial space was thought of in hodological terms.[44] Benet Salway draws our attention to the probably widespread existence of monuments (such as the *stadiasmos prouinciae Lyciae* of 45 CE, *SEG* 44 [1994], 1205) located at the gates of towns, listing distances to different

[37]See Rossi (2010) for a thorough and insightful analysis of references to time, place, and travelling in Cicero's correspondence.

[38]Beard (2002) 128.

[39]On time in Cicero's letters, particularly their handling of the relationship between past, present and future, see Hutchinson (1998) 139–71.

[40]Schröder (2018) 85. On the role of couriers, see also Nicholson (1994), Kolb (2000) 20–7, White (2010) 11–18.

[41]See Richardson (1976), (2008).

[42]On developments in the late republic, see Morrell (2017). On developments under the principate, see Millar (1977).

[43]On the representation of space in the Augustan period, see Nicolet (1991) esp. ch. 5.

[44]The hodological conception of the empire's space is emphasised by contributors to Adams and Laurence (2001) and to Talbert and Brodersen (2004). Interestingly information on sea journeys tends to survive in Greek, while land itineraries are more usually preserved in the Latin tradition. See Brodersen (2001), Salway (2001), (2004).

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locations.[45] Letter-writing, I want to argue, contributed to a way of understanding the empire not so much in quantitative terms (how many miles from Rome to Lugdunum?) but in terms of what could perhaps be described as 'isolated, qualitative spaces', points on an itinerary, whose separation was to be understood in terms of time, as much as spatial distance.[46] Just how qualitative the conception of individual places along the way may have been, however (outside Italy, at any rate), is a further issue to which we shall return.

Effacing/highlighting distance

Members of the Roman elite seem not to have written letters when writer and addressee were in the same location.[47] Peter White has underlined the attention paid at least by those in Cicero's circle to the importance of face-to-face meetings – and the anxiety produced by situations where relations with peers could not be so cultivated: 'an important function of letters was to serve as prophylactics against … estrangement – as stopgaps for the face-to-face encounters in which members of the elite were temporarily unable to engage'.[48] Some kinds of letter make little or no reference to the distance separating writer and addressee; the focus is rather on Cicero's vibrant and closely connected network of friends and clients. Such letters work to efface distance (both spatial and temporal). The elision of distance is particularly notable in the case of letters of recommendation which were perhaps not especially time sensitive – and might well have been delivered by the person recommended. The individual letter evokes, indeed reinforces, an established relationship; Cicero and his correspondents seem to occupy a shared virtual space. Even writing to his brother (when the latter is in Asia Minor), to give him advice for how to be a good provincial governor Cicero makes no reference to distance. There is, it should be noted, a certain formality to this letter (*Ad Q. fr.* 1.1 [SB 1]), which was evidently intended for wider circulation, serving as an advertisement for the Cicero brothers' model of virtuous provincial administration.

The letter's role as proxy for its author comes to the fore when, for instance, sections of a letter from Caesar are read out by one friend to another – it is almost like having him in the room.[49] As White puts it, 'read in the context of a tête-à-tête between mutual friends of Caesar, the letter acquired a value beyond its content, as a momentary presentification of the bantering, back-slapping Caesar himself'.[50] This was a crucial means for Caesar, absent for extended periods on campaign, to maintain a 'presence' back in Rome.[51] Cicero sometimes acknowledges explicitly the limitations

[45]While the *stadiasmos* in Greek gives distances in stades, fragments of Latin *tabellaria* from Gaul and Africa use Roman miles, as Salway(2001: 48–58) underlines–. Individual milestones along major roads would indicate the distance to or from the terminal point of the road. Written itineraries might indicate the distance between overnight stopping points (*mansiones*).

[46]I borrow the phrase from Riggsby's (2003: 170) discussion of Pliny's villa letters. The itineraries discussed by Salway (2001: 26–7) generally specify the distance between points in terms of Roman miles (for land journeys).

[47]As White notes (2010) 10, 'with rare exceptions, Romans exchanged letters only when one of the parties was away from Rome'.

[48]White (2010) 19.

[49]White (2010) 20.

[50]White (2010) 20.

[51]Termed 'his stranglehold' by Gildenhard (2018) 208.

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of epistolary communication as a substitute for face-to-face contact. A letter written from Cilicia to Gaius Cassius, at that time proquaestor in Syria (*Fam.* 15.14.2, 6 [SB 106]), expresses disappointment that they have been unable to meet, while urging the potential of letters to compensate – at least to a degree. In a later letter to Cassius, written in 45 BCE, drawing attention to the letter's capacity to make the addressee present to the writer, Cicero exclaims: *quasi coram adesse uideare, cum scribo aliquid ad te*, 'when I write something to you, I seem to see you here in front of me' (*Ad fam.* 15.16.1 [SB 215]).

In other letters a stronger sense of separation is evident; distance, temporal and spatial, is hard to overlook, when Cicero's brother Quintus is in Gaul from 54 BCE to early in 51 and communications between Cicero and Quintus are variable.[52] One letter is noted to have taken twenty-seven days – presumably longer than usual, as Cicero notes his own anxiety.[53] Another letter which Cicero received from Julius Caesar, sent from Britain and describing his campaign, also takes twenty-seven days (*Ad Q fr.* 3.1.25 [SB 21]). Writing in mid Oct 54 BCE, Cicero laments that it is six weeks since he received a letter from his brother:

> sed me illa cura sollicitat angitque vehementer quod dierum iam amplius quadraginta intervallo nihil a te, nihil a Caesare, nihil ex istis locis non modo litterarum sed ne rumoris quidem adfluxit. me autem iam et mare istuc et terra sollicitat neque desino, ut fit in amore, ea quae minime volo cogitare. qua re non equidem iam te rogo ut ad me de te, de rebis istis scribas (numquam enim, cum potes, praetermittis), sed hoc te scire volo, nihil fere umquam me sic exspectasse ut, cum haec scribebam, tuas litteras.
>
> But I am very anxious and worried by the fact that for more than six weeks now I have heard nothing either from you or from Caesar. Not a letter, not even a rumour has trickled in from that part of the world. Sea and land out there both make me anxious now, and, as usual when people one is fond of are concerned, I am continually imagining the worst. I won't ask you to write to me about yourself and about what is going on, for you never lose an opportunity; but I do want you to know that I have never been so impatient for anything in my life as I am for a letter from you as I write these lines.
>
> *Ad Q. fr.* 3.3.1 = SB 23

As Cicero suggests, by this point in the autumn conditions made travel more difficult – and dangerous. Separation here induces an anxiety Cicero does not hesitate to express (the verb *sollicitare* with Cicero as object appears twice in this brief extract).

Later, when he himself is serving as provincial governor in Cilicia, letters from Rome take an age to reach Cicero. Writing from his military camp near Cybistra in September 51, he notes that he has just received a letter from Atticus which arrived with particular rapidity only forty-six days after being dispatched from Rome (*Att.* 5.19.1 [SB 112]).[54] Another letter from Atticus takes almost five months to reach Cicero (*Att.* 5.21.4 [SB

[52]On these letters, see also Osgood (2009) esp. 342–6.

[53]Though this may have been provoked by the letter's contents (*Ad Q. fr.* 3.1.17 [SB 21]).

[54]Cf. 6.1 = SB 115 where it took around five months for a letter from Cicero to reach Atticus in Epirus and then for Atticus' reply to reach Cicero in Laodicea, from 21 Sept to 19 Feb. (Hunter (1913) 91). Elsewhere too he refers to the difficulty of sending letters from Cilicia, e.g. *Att.* 5.20.8 = SB 113.

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114]). Having left his brother Quintus in charge of Cilicia's military force, at that point stationed beyond the Taurus mountains, Cicero, writing in February 50 BCE, advises Atticus that he should expect no communication from him for the next few months since snow makes the Taurus impassable before June (*Att.* 5.21.14). Cicero is forthright in regretting his distance from Rome; his sense of being out of the loop torments him: 'I'm pining for ... the world, the forum, Rome, my house, you my friends', *lucem, forum, urbem, domum, uos desidero* (*Att.* 5.15.1 [SB 108]).[55] It is ironic that a few years earlier in 54 BCE Cicero did not hesitate to criticise his younger friend Trebatius (at that time in Gaul with Julius Caesar) for expressing a similar longing (*desideria urbis et urbanitatis*, 'hankering after Rome and city ways') with an exhortation, couched in the language of Roman masculinity, to put aside his foolishness and a quotation from Ennius asserting the benefits of travel both to oneself and to one's *patria*, 'fatherland'.[56]

The opening comments of letters sometimes work to efface the physical distance between Cicero and his addressee in a manner which, rather than overlooking spatial separation, highlights the letter's potency to overcome it. This, too, is a feature more evident in letters to family and close friends. In another letter from Cilicia, Cicero articulates strongly the effect of receiving Atticus' letters: *Video enim te et, quasi coram adsis, ita cerno συμπάθειαν amoris tui*, 'I can see you and perceive your affectionate concern as though you were here beside me' (*Att.* 5.18.3 [SB 111]).[57] The letter as physical proxy for its writer can itself sometimes provoke anxiety – one from Atticus in Rome reaches Cicero in Athens (on his way back from Cilicia). Unevenly written, it is graphic evidence for Atticus' fever (*Att.* 6.9.1[SB 123]). Sometimes the receipt of a letter serves primarily as a reminder of the great distance separating sender and addressee; Cicero laments his separation from Atticus, for instance, writing from Cilicia, *Att.* 6.3.1 ([SB 117]), that he needs Atticus' advice urgently but *tu autem abes longe gentium*, 'you are far, far away'.[58] He quotes a scrap of Greek poetry, evoking the vastness of the ocean to underline his point. Cicero's evocation of geographical space in terms of *gentes*, peoples, is not unusual. His contemporary the poet Catullus writes of travelling *Multas per gentes* to visit the place where his brother is buried (101.1); another poem locates his brother's remains in the Troad, in the province of Asia (68.91–2).[59]

The space of empire

A sense of separation is especially evident during Cicero's time in exile – when, lost in solipsistic solitude, he has almost nothing to say about the places where he stays.[60] Certainly we might note that in general, as White observes, 'Cicero almost never deigns to take note of weather or scenery.'[61] Nevertheless, the process of travelling at least is much more explicitly foregrounded when Cicero is a self-confident emissary of the Roman state, on his way to govern a province, than earlier when he is a miserable exile, trailing around the eastern Mediterranean.[62] Cicero, en route to govern Cilicia,

[55] On Cicero's particular attachment to Rome, see Gildenhard (2017) 91.
[56] *Fam.* 7.6 = SB 27, suggestively discussed by Leach (2006) 253–4.
[57] Compare *Ad fam.* 15.16.1 (= SB 215) to Cassius, quoted above.
[58] For this manner of expressing distance (*OLD gens* 4b), cf. *Fam.* 12.22.2 = SB 346.
[59] Lewis (2018) explores Catullus' treatment of geographical space in the poems relating to Lesbia.
[60] Beard (2002) 143 comments on Cicero's articulation of exile as a state of not being.
[61] White (2010) 6.
[62] As Rossi (2010: 94, 262–72) underlines.

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writes to Atticus from Brundisium in early June 51 BCE, from Actium, from Athens, from Delos.[63] A letter sent to Atticus from Delos bemoans the discomforts of travel (*Negotium magnum est nauigare atque id mense Quintili*, 'Travelling by sea is no light matter, even in July', *Att.* 5.12.1 [SB 105]). The journey from Athens to Delos, beset by gales, took six days. Having described the uncomfortable sea-journey the letter has nothing whatever to say about Delos itself. Indeed, Cicero so overlooks the island that, in concluding his letter, having made clear he does not intend to leave Delos until the weather has settled, he describes himself as writing *plane in medio mare* 'right on the high seas' (*Att.* 5.12.3 [SB 105]). Safely arrived in Ephesus, after a slow but uneventful journey, Cicero again writes to Atticus, offering no information about Ephesus itself, except to comment on the astounding numbers of people there to welcome him.[64] The road from Ephesus and on to Tralles is hot and dusty, *aestuosa et puluerulenta* (5.14.1 [SB 107]); Cicero finally arrives in his province, reaching Laodicea at the end of July (*Att.* 5.15 [SB 108]).[65]

Cicero's letters crossed the province of Cilicia, as he tried to engineer a smooth handover from his prickly – and hard to pin down – predecessor Appius Claudius in August 51 BCE. During his governorship, Cicero was desperate to keep up with events in Rome, as his correspondence with Atticus and with others, such as Marcus Caelius Rufus, makes particularly clear.[66] Indeed, addressing Caelius, Cicero asserts his complete lack of interest in provincial affairs: 'Sojourn abroad of any kind … is squalid obscurity', *omnis peregrinatio … obscura et sordida est* (*Fam.* 2.12.2 [SB 95]). The province itself is elsewhere described only as 'forlorn and, without exaggeration, permanently ruined', *perditam et plane euersam in perpetuum* (*Att.* 5.16.2 [SB 109]), ravaged by the ill government of Cicero's predecessor.[67] It is as if all that matters about Cilicia is its role in showcasing the impact made upon it by individual governors, whether bad (like Appius) or good (like Cicero himself).

Occasionally Cicero engages more closely with the material geography of empire. The account of his military campaign refers to numerous place names and geographical features (*Att.* 5.20 [SB 113]), though his purpose here is conspicuously instrumental. What matters is that his activities are properly appreciated by the senate back in Rome. In writing to Atticus, Cicero is self-deprecating about his military victory, jokingly emphasising the obscurity of the location (*Att.* 5.20.1 [SB 113]) – a place Atticus won't have heard of, though he later notes that at one point in his campaign he encamped near Issus 'on the very spot where Alexander … pitched his camp against Darius' (*Att.* 5.20.3 [SB 113]).[68] But for the most part he is content to think of his province as a kind of household over which he, scrupulous, fair and clement, rules with paternal care – domesticating any exoticism (*Att.* 6.1.2 [SB 115]).

[63]Stages of the journey are referred to in *Att.* 5.9 (SB 102), describing a stop off in Actium whence he proceeded by land to Patrae.

[64]*Att.* 5.13.1 = SB 106; cf. 5.20.1 = SB 113.

[65]As Casson (1974) 151 underlines, the journey took longer as Cicero (presumably) chose the more comfortable option of island stopovers.

[66]E.g. *Fam.* 2.14 = SB 89, sent from Laodicea.

[67]Cf. *Att.* 6.1.2 = SB 115. On Cicero and provincial governance see Steel (2001).

[68]Cicero's official correspondence and his letters to Cato (e.g. *Fam.* 15.4 = SB 110) are rather less self-deprecating. See Morello (2013) on this exchange.

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Attention to the specific character of the places he travels to – or through – is rare on Cicero's part, as I have noted. The geographical particularity of the places under Rome's rule is largely invisible. Athens, however, is a partial exception – reflecting its singular place in Roman literary culture and in Cicero's own experience. On the journey out to Cilicia in June 51 BCE Cicero stops off in Athens for ten days (*Att.* 5.10, 5.11 [SB 103, 104]), where he stays with Aristus, at that time head of the group of philosophers known as the Academy.[69] Here at least he does pause for comment; Athens delights him (*ualde me Athenae delectarunt*, 5.10.5), though many things have changed. Philosophy is all at sixes and sevens (*sursum deorsum*). He and Atticus are exercised by a plan (later abandoned) on the part of Memmius (now resident in Athens) to demolish the ruins of the house in the deme of Melita where Epicurus once lived (5.11.6).[70] Such is Cicero's devotion to Athens that he later writes to Atticus to explore the idea of funding a gateway for the Academy there:[71] *ualde ipsas Athenas amo; uolo esse aliquod monumentum*, 'I am really so fond of Athens, the actual city. I want to have some memorial there' (6.1.26 [SB 115]). This thought is, he suggests, prompted by the story that Appius (Cicero's predecessor as governor of Cilicia, of whom he is elsewhere distinctly critical) is proposing a gateway at Eleusis.[72] Athens for Cicero, despite his physical presence there, is primarily the Athens of the past, not the present, the past of its philosophical and literary heritage – and Cicero's personal past, shared with Atticus; they had studied together there as young men in 79–78 BCE. The letter to Atticus, sent from Athens in June 51 BCE, after locating the writer, continues: *eram autem totus, crede mihi, tecum et, quamquam sine iis per me ipse, tamen acrius uestigiis tuis monitus de te cogitabam*, 'My thoughts, believe me, are all with you, and though I have no need of such admonitions the traces of your presence here call you the more vividly to mind.'[73] Athens matters to Cicero, we may infer, because it is full of reminders of Atticus.

A sense of location, of a rather different kind, is perhaps also evident in Cicero's correspondence with his brother Quintus, when Quintus was stationed with Julius Caesar in Gaul.[74] Some of Quintus' correspondence bore *litoribus Britanniae proximae* 'the shores of nearer Britain' as the sender's location.[75] In another letter Cicero writes to his brother: *o iucundas mihi tuas de Britannia litteras! timebam Oceanum, timebam litus insulae,* 'How pleased I was to get your letter from Britain! I dreaded the Ocean and the island coast' (*Ad Q. fr.* 2.16.4 [SB 20], late 54 BCE). It seems that Quintus' correspondence has at least hinted at the exotic – and perilous – conditions in which he is situated:

[69]Cf. *Fam.* 2.8.3 = SB 80.

[70]The plan is explained in *Fam.* 13.1.3 = SB 63, addressed to Memmius. The plan was opposed by Patro (a long-standing associate of Cicero), who had succeeded Phaedrus as head of the Epicurean school in Athens. Cf. *Att.* 5.19.3 (SB 112), where Cicero refers to the trouble he took over the ruins (*parietinae*) at Melita.

[71]Cf. 6.6.2 = SB 121.

[72]Shackleton Bailey *ad loc.* cites *CIL* III, 547 commemorating Appius Claudius' vow as consul in 54 BCE to rebuild the old vestibule to the temple of the goddess at Eleusis. After his death, the vow was fulfilled by his nephews.

[73]Compare the comment at *Leg.* 2.4: *Mouemur enim nescio quo pacto locis ipsis in quibus eorum quos diligimus aut admiramur adsunt uestigia*.

[74]See Henderson (2007) on *Ad Q.fr.*

[75]*Att.* 4.18.5 = SB 92. Though doubts have been expressed about the reliability of the MSS here. See Shackleton Bailey *ad loc.*

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> te uero ὑπόθεσιν scribendi egregiam habere uideo. quos tu situs, quas naturas rerum et locorum, quos mores, quas gentis, quas pugnas, quem uero ipsum imperatorem habes!
>
> You evidently have some splendid literary material: the places, the natural phenomena and scenes, the customs, the peoples, the fight, and, last but not least, the Commander-in-Chief!

The phrase *ὑπόθεσιν scribendi* 'literary material' suggests that Quintus was planning a poetic work.[76] Indeed it appears Marcus had undertaken to supply some verse in connection with this project.[77] It is not to allay his brother's concerns or to satisfy his curiosity that Quintus provides these topographic and ethnographic details. This descriptive account of the wild edge of the empire obtrudes into a letter only when a different kind of writing is in view. We shall return to this issue below.

Another letter (*Ad Q. fr.* 3.1 [SB 21]) expresses Cicero's acceptance that Quintus must stay longer with Caesar (in the hope of securing his finances and position),[78] but Cicero also makes clear how much he misses his brother (stressing his *dolor* and *desiderium*, 3.1.9). Yet although Cicero alludes here to the practical consequences of his brother's situation, remarkably little is said explicitly concerning Quintus' location. Cicero worries about conditions which may imperil his brother and the difficulty of communications, as we have seen, but expresses no curiosity about Gaul or Britain as places. They serve as a source of slaves:

> De mancipiis quod mihi polliceris, ualde te amo et sum equidem, uti scribis, et Romae et <in> praediis infrequens.
>
> Thank you very much for your promise of slaves. As you say, I am indeed understaffed, both in Rome and on my estates
>
> *Ad Q. fr.* 3.7.4 = SB 27

All that signifies is the benefits – in cash or kind – which may accrue to the Cicero brothers from Quintus' period of service in this remote and perilous location.

Italian ekphrases

To be sure a sense of place is not altogether absent from Cicero's letters to his brother. While Quintus is roughing it on campaign in the dodgy climate of the Atlantic region, Marcus sends him an enticing and detailed picture of the delectable villa near Arpinum whose construction Marcus has been overseeing on his behalf – a future haven from

[76] At *Ad Q. fr.* 3.5.4 = SB 25, Cicero refers to his brother's prolific composition of tragedies.

[77] Earlier, Marcus expresses the desire to create his own poetic composition on the subject of Britain, for which he requests material from Quintus, at this point on the journey from Italy to Gaul, *Ad Q. fr.* 2.14.2 (= SB 18), *modo mihi date Britanniam quam pingam coloribus tuis, penicillo meo*, 'All you have to do is to give me Britain to paint. I'll use your colours with my brush'. The relationship between the two brothers' literary projects is much discussed. See Byrne (1998), Kruschwitz (2014).

[78] As well as keeping the Cicero brothers on the right side of Julius Caesar; cf. 3.6.1 (= SB 26).

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the hurly burly of the battlefield – and the forum.[79] Cicero offers a number of comments about building and decorative work on his brother's estates, which he himself is overseeing. *Ad Quintum fratrem* 3.1, written in September 54, begins with an evocative allusion to Arpinum, from where Cicero is writing:

> Ego ex magnis caloribus (non enim meminimus maiores) in Arpinati summa cum amoenitate <tum salubritate> fluminis me refeci ludorum diebus
>
> Escaped from the great heat wave (I don't remember a greater), I have refreshed myself on the banks of our delightful and salubrious river at Arpinum during the Games period.
>
> *Ad Q. fr.* 3.1.1 = SB 21

This is a suggestive prelude to comments on Quintus' property, at Arcanum, where Cicero notes landscaping works in progress. More space is given to the newly acquired Manilius property (located nearby). Cicero goes on to refer to alterations he has set in train relating to other areas of the house, including the baths (3.1.2), in several cases making arrangements to have corrected work that has been badly done by contractors. No trouble is spared as Cicero strives to ensure his brother's villa will be as elegant and comfortable as possible. Once further amenities have been added, Cicero insists: *equidem hoc quod melius intellego adfirmo, mirifica suauitate te uillam habiturum*, 'For my part I'll promise what I better understand, that you will have an exceptionally charming country house' (3.1.3). Here then a sense of location is deftly conveyed. But this is Italy. Indeed, in this respect we might see Cicero's letters as an anticipation of Pliny's evocative descriptions of his own villas more than a century later. And it is also worth reflecting on Cicero's purpose here; his intention is to describe the works undertaken, to emphasise the great trouble he himself has gone to on his brother's behalf – and to underline his own good taste, when it comes to villa design.[80]

Only very occasionally does an element in Cicero's surroundings carry more emotional weight; a piece of furniture reminds him of his brother:

> Hanc scripsi ante <lucem> ad lychnuchum ligneolum, qui mihi erat periucundus quod eum te aiebant, cum esses Sami, curasse faciendum.
>
> I am writing this before dawn by the light of a little lamp with a wooden stand, which delights me because they say you had it made when you were in Samos.
>
> *Ad Q. fr.* 3.5.9 = SB 25

A little lamp, a souvenir from an earlier journey, acquired by Quintus on the island of Samos, furnishes an additional concrete reminder to Marcus of his brother, now in a still more distant part of the empire. This epistolary moment brings together the brothers' present period of separation, Marcus in Italy and Quintus in Gaul, with an earlier one, when Quintus was in the eastern Mediterranean. Such separations, painful

[79] See Rossi (2010) 220–2.

[80] As Rossi underlines (2010) 221, almost all the verbs are first-person singular.

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and often protracted, were a constant feature of family life, of relations between friends, for members of Rome's ruling class. For all their limitations, for all the risks to which they were subject, letters nevertheless allowed the Cicero brothers – and countless others – to stay connected across the space of the Roman empire. These connections in their turn also played a crucial part in the construction of the web of imperial space, linking scattered individual members of the Roman elite as nodes in a dense network.

Under the principate, letters in their more literary form certainly have their ekphrastic moments. Descriptions of particular places in Seneca's philosophical letters play a didactic role.[81] The would-be Stoic wise person may aspire to a kind of cosmopolitanism which makes the particularity of place a matter of supreme indifference and yet Seneca repeatedly offers vignettes of specific locations – his own villa (*Ep.* 12), the villa of Scipio (*Ep.* 86), glimpses of Vatia's seaside hideaway (*Ep.* 55), the fleshpots of Baiae (*Ep.* 51). Italy, then, is evoked but a sense of the space of empire, indeed of the world more broadly, is rarely evident in the letters.[82] Seneca jokingly offers to swim across the straits separating him from his correspondent Lucilius in Sicily (*Ep.* 45).[83] In exile on Corsica earlier (where he was from 41 to 49 CE), Seneca, writing a consolatory treatise addressed to his mother (*Ad Helviam matrem* – not strictly a letter, of course), characterises the island merely as barren, *nudum*, and precipitous, *abruptum*.[84] Corsica's only significant characteristic is its distance from his family. The Younger Pliny, by contrast, articulates his sense of his own identity particularly through his descriptions of places, carefully crafted portraits which occupy crucial positions in his letters.[85] But it is places in Italy that make Pliny who he is.[86]

Provincial (non-)places

The final book of Pliny's correspondence (Book 10) does see Pliny journey beyond Italy's confines, when he serves as the emperor's representative in the province of Bithynia-Pontus around 110 CE.[87] Book 10 differs from the earlier books in numerous respects, not least in that it consists entirely of letters exchanged between Pliny and the emperor Trajan.[88] This is perhaps not the place to look for casual observations

[81] See Edwards (2018b). See further Henderson (2004).

[82] More distant regions and their geographic features have a much more prominent role in the *Naturales quaestiones*, however.

[83] He also muses on how Lucilius may describe Sicily's Mount Etna in his poetry (*Ep.* 79). On Seneca's engagement with the ambiguous status of Sicily as part of, but not part of, Italy, see Gowers (2011).

[84] *Ad Polyb.* 13.3 he refers to his place of exile as an *angulus* 'corner'. See Rimell (2015) 115–16 on Seneca's reworking of this term.

[85] 'What interiority is to a life of Augustine, landscape and locality can be to a life of Pliny' (Gibson (2020) 23–4).

[86] Gibson (2020) 23: 'No Roman writer ties his identity to the regions of Italy more successfully.'

[87] This was not, however, Pliny's first posting beyond Italy. On his earlier service in Syria (perhaps a few years after the accession of Domitian in 81 CE) to which Pliny refers on several occasions in the letters, see Gibson (2020) 194. On the particular nature of Pliny's appointment in Bithynia-Pontus, see Gibson (2020) 207–8.

[88] Recent work, such as Woolf (2006) and (2015), Noreña (2007) and Gibson and Morello (2012), has stressed the artfulness of Book 10, which Woolf (2015: 143) teasingly terms, 'an epistolary novel', though see also the comments of Lavan (2018).

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about the local scenery. Nevertheless, it is striking that, as Greg Woolf has underlined, these letters have almost nothing to say about the province as a place: 'No forests and wild shores, no historic sites or crumbling temples, no strange and uncivilised peoples appear.'[89] By letter 22 only one location in the province has been named, Prusa.[90] Pliny shows no interest in landscape or ethnography; the space of the provinces here has nothing remotely exotic about it.

Pliny's admiration for the letters of Cicero (indeed for Cicero as a role model more generally) is often explicit.[91] As Woolf notes, for Pliny, writing letters from his province offered him the opportunity to engage with another element in Cicero's *oeuvre*, the letters written on the way to and during Cicero's time as governor of Cilicia (as well as discussions of provincial government in his speeches, and his letters to Quintus).[92] Might this help to explain the pared down nature of Pliny's engagement with Bithynia?[93] Unsurprisingly, in his correspondence with Trajan, Pliny – unlike Cicero writing to his intimates – betrays no longing to be back in Italy. It was the emperor, after all, who had sent him on his mission. Instead, Pliny's letters work hard to efface the distance between Bithynia and Rome. Rarely is reference made to the time elapsing between the dispatch of a letter and the receipt of its response.[94] Indeed, the scenario, carefully crafted by Pliny, in which a serious-minded public servant, faced with a pressing problem in his province, refers back to the emperor in Rome for a solution, is pretty much illusory.[95] Epistolary conventions, the power of the letter – in the right hands – to bridge distance both spatial and temporal, induce the reader to suspend disbelief. A spotlight is shone on the imaginatively staged collaboration, close and harmonious, between the emperor in Rome and his worthy representative at the empire's edge. In letters, at least, the space of empire can be represented as Rome writ large.

Once they are outside Italy, it is striking how infrequently Cicero and Pliny, too, show any interest in the specific qualities of the particular places from which they are writing. In locations beyond Italy, where they seem to have had almost no sense of attachment to place, the space of letters, whether for Cicero or for Pliny, lacks almost all significant local colour. Only Athens, as far as Cicero is concerned, is a partial exception. We could characterise this provincial space, drawing on Augé's insights into the non-places of the modern, globalised world, as for the Roman elite a kind of 'bureaucratic non-place'.[96]

[89] Woolf (2006) 106. As he observes, this offers, 'a real contrast with the listing of exotic Pontic toponyms and ethnonyms in Arrian's *Periplus* written in the next reign'. On Arrian's *Periplus*, see Rood (2012), Soler (2005) 54–66.

[90] Woolf (2006) 98–100.

[91] See particularly *Ep*. 9.2 (also 5.3). On Pliny's engagement with Cicero as a model, see Riggsby (1995), Marchesi (2008) 207–40.

[92] Woolf (2015) 144, though he also notes the differences between their bodies of provincial correspondence (Woolf (2006) 102–3).

[93] Commented on by Woolf (2006) 101–2. Gibson (2020) 202–4 discusses Pliny's comments on these cities, noting his 'lack of response to a cityscape' (this also characterises Pliny's engagement with Italy). In Pontus, his attention is focused on Amastris, Sinope, and Amisus.

[94] With a few exceptions such as 10.120.

[95] Noted by Woolf (2015) 146, Gibson (2020) 208.

[96] Augé (1995). The phrase is Amy Russell's (pers. com.).

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In Pliny's correspondence, as in Cicero's case, letters written from a distant province disclose no obvious interest in evoking the exotic, in exercising the imperial gaze, as we might term it.[97] Woolf draws a contrast with imperialist writings of more recent periods: 'The experience of modern empire reflects a fascination with the exotic, a desire to engage with the strangeness of foreign lands that took sexual, gastronomic, aesthetic, poetic, architectural, scientific and even mystical forms. Romans seem to have had none of this appetite for the alien.'[98] Woolf makes an important point. At least some British imperial administrators, however, showed themselves, in their correspondence at least, as oblivious to their surroundings as their Roman predecessors. During his years of imperial service in India from 1834 to 1838, T. B. Macaulay suffered from acute feelings of loneliness. He wrote a mass of letters home. They have very little to say about his surroundings (beyond complaints about the heat and the lack of company). Instead, Macaulay writes to his relatives about family matters, about how much his misses them. And he writes to his friends about what he has been reading. While he was in India, Macaulay (who had an exceptional command of ancient Greek and Latin) devoured a mass of classical literature, regularly spending four or five hours a day immersed in ancient texts. His reading was compulsive; 'literature has saved my life and my reason', he wrote to his friend T. F. Ellis.[99] He had a preference for Greek but, far from home, he came to develop a new sympathy for Cicero.[100] He read Cicero's letters to Atticus from exile and sympathised with their author. He comments in the margin of his copy: 'Poor fellow! He makes a pitiful figure. But it is impossible not to feel for him. Since I left England I have not despised Cicero and Ovid for their lamentations in exile as much as I did.'[101] Catherine Hall has charted Macaulay's obliviousness to the cultures – and places – of Britain's imperial possessions.[102] It was to the imperial metropolis (in his case London) that he, like Cicero, felt himself profoundly attached.[103] Phiroze Vasunia comments perceptively: 'To be a "classicist" in India was, for Macaulay, also a way of being British and asserting his British identity.'[104]

As for the Romans, Woolf does concede that other kinds of Roman imperial writing might dwell with some fascination on the variety of flora and fauna, the multifarious ethnography and geography contained within the empire or encountered on its fringes.[105] Julius Caesar's *Gallic War* offers some colourful details of the exotic territories he was adding to Rome's empire; Germany and Britain, in his account, are

[97]See e.g. Hulme and Youngs (2002).

[98]Woolf (2006) 105.

[99]Macaulay, Thomas Babington. The letters of Thomas Babington Macaulay ed. in 6 vols. by Thomas Pinney, Cambridge University Press 1974–81, citation from volume 3 (1976) 158.

[100]On the complexity of Macaulay's attitude to Rome and the ancient Romans, see Edwards (1999b).

[101]Trevelyan (1908) 307, Hall (2012) 239.

[102]Hall (2012) 290.

[103]Hall (2012) 107, 290. Macaulay's attitude was perhaps not altogether typical. One might draw a contrast between his indifference to Indian culture and the intense and learned interest developed by others, such as the philologists Sir William Jones and Horace Wilson.

[104]Vasunia (2015) 145.

[105]'Arrian's view of the Euxine coast is completely different, much more like the colour with which Tacitus renders Agricola's province untamed and unknown', observes Woolf (2006) 105.

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'lands with strange animals, dark forests, and men painted blue with mustaches'.[106] The particularity of the world of the Black Sea is documented in vivid detail in Arrian's *Periplus*, composed a few years after Pliny's time, as well as by the earlier geographer Strabo, the later satirist Lucian – and the poet Ovid.[107]

The contrast between Pliny and Ovid has provoked particular critical interest. Ovid, too, was writing letters, of a kind. A sequence of letters earlier in Book 10 of Pliny's letters provides some detail of his journey out to Bithynia, a journey which seems to have taken around fifty days (10.15–17).[108] Roy Gibson and Ruth Morello explore the suggestive possibility that Pliny (if it is indeed Pliny who edited Book 10) chooses to include these, humdrum as they are, in order to hint at a contrast with Ovid, who documented in highly coloured and disturbing terms his own journey to the Black Sea in the first book of his first collection of exile poems, the *Tristia*, around a century earlier.[109] The poet's fraught relationship with the angry emperor Augustus, who had ordered his relegation to the empire's edge, offers a piquant contrast with the mutual respect characterising the correspondence between a dutiful Pliny and his beneficent superior, Trajan, a century later.

The stark difference between Pontus as described by Pliny and by Ovid might be seen, suggests Woolf, as 'partly a matter of genre'.[110] Yet Ovid's principal exilic works, his two collections in elegiac verse, the *Tristia* and particularly the *Epistulae ex Ponto*, are often, if not consistently, epistolary in character.[111] The first line of the first poem of the *Epistulae ex Ponto*, addressed to Ovid's friend Brutus, juxtaposes, in characteristically epistolary fashion the author's name, *Naso*, and the place from which he writes, *Tomitanae*, stressing the length of Ovid's residency in Tomis.[112] Ovid's repeated emphasis in this collection on the single epistolary poem as a material object, each individual missive making its lonely and perilous journey across land and sea, underlines insistently the fragility of the poet's own material existence, his distance from Rome. Ovid's verse letters disturb; here the perilous exoticism of the empire's

[106]Osgood (2009) 351. On the politics of space in Caesar's writing, see also Riggsby (2006) esp. chs. 1 and 2 and Gildenhard (2017).

[107]Habinek (1998) 151–70 reads Ovid's evocation of the dangerous particularity of the Black Sea region as complicit with the project of imperialism. On the ethnographic character of Ovid's writing in the *Epistulae ex Ponto*, see Ramsby (2018).

[108]Millar (2004b) 40–1. There is no evidence for a return journey. Scholars have inferred that Pliny met his end in his province, though see Noreña (2007) 270–1 for a more open interpretation.

[109]Gibson and Morello (2012) 261–3. It is striking that, as Syme (1985: 176) noted, the very first letter in Pliny's letter collection reworks a programmatic phrase from Ovid's *Epistulae ex Ponto*, 3.9, which was presumably intended to be the last in his collection (the fourth book is thought to have been edited after Ovid's death). See further Marchesi (2008) 20–2. Gibson and Morello (2012: 261–2) suggest that, through alluding to themes in *Tristia* book 1, 'Pliny ends his work in a chiastic pattern of allusion bringing his reader back to the beginning of Ovid's exilic letters'–. See also Woolf (2015) 144.

[110]Woolf (2006) 94. Of course Tomis was located on the western shore of the Black Sea, while Pliny's province covered the zone to the south and east.

[111]On Ovid's deployment of epistolary form in the exile poems, see Davisson (1985), Oliensis (1997), Martelli (2013), Edwards (2023).

[112]For Ovid's location at the edge of the world, see also *Tr.* 4.9, 5.2.63. The pairing of the author's name and the place from which he writes often recurs in the opening lines of individual poems in the *Ex Ponto*: 1.7, 2.2, 2.4, 2.6, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6, 4.9.

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margins is foregrounded. The weather conditions are wretched, Ovid cannot make himself understood, barbarians lurk menacingly nearby.[113] Certainly these elements are significantly fictionalised.[114] Perhaps, indeed, descriptions of Ovid's place of exile ought to be considered among the less 'epistolary' features of the poems.[115] We might remember Quintus Cicero a few decades earlier, whose letters to his brother disclose suggestive observations about exotic Britain, but only when he has a poetic project in view. In the end, the exoticism of empire is the stuff of poetry intended for a wider audience, not of the letter home. The multifariousness of empire had its particular literary place; to read of wild remote places, of barbarous tribes might be expected to induce a pleasurable frisson in the armchair traveller, unfurling an epic poem, a picaresque novel, or indeed a work of geography.[116] But such descriptions had little place in a letter from a friend or a brother, writing from a far-flung location, who was not to be seen again for months (if at all).

Imperial space familiarised

Certain strands in spatial theory, in relation to socio-spatial networks, for instance, or Augé's 'non-place', can indeed illuminate ancient Roman epistolary engagements with the space of the empire. But it remains crucially important to attend to the specifics of literary genre. In the end, we may speculate, the work of Roman imperial epistolography is precisely not to showcase the vastness and variety of the world ruled by Rome, nor to disclose the extent of the empire's space. Far from home, the Roman letter writer was not disposed to seek consolation – whether for himself or his addressee – in the description of his exotic surroundings. An emphasis on the wild and strange in correspondence between friends or family members hundreds of miles apart would have offered cold comfort. It must have been all too easy to imagine being absorbed by that alien landscape, disappearing into the vastness of the empire. In that abyss many would ultimately be interred, like Catullus' brother, like Ovid, perhaps indeed like Pliny himself, hundreds of miles from his Italian homeland.

We may often feel a sense of disappointment in our encounters with letters written from locations scattered across the Roman empire. The space of the empire, almost unimaginably vast though it must have seemed to those who lived within it, is for the most part implicit rather than explicit in the correspondence that survives – except to the extent that so many letters appear to have been composed in transit. Rather, though they allude to journeys – though the condition of their existence is precisely absence, separation – the work of these letters is generally not to document distance but rather to shrink the empire, to make it manageable, to efface its variety, its strangeness, to render the *orbis*, as far as possible, a virtual *urbs*.

[113]E.g. *Ex Ponto* 1.2, which dwells on the terrifying local tribesmen. Baffling local languages are invoked in *Tr.* 5.7, 5.10 (though in *Pont.* 4.13, Ovid claims to have written a poem in Getic). The excesses of the climate feature repeatedly, e.g. *Tr.* 3.10, *Pont.* 4.7, 4.9, 4.10.

[114]As Williams (1994) persuasively demonstrated.

[115]The journey out figures in *Tristia* Book 1, which deploys few epistolary features.

[116]Soler (2005) esp. 251–3, argues that more detailed, descriptive accounts of journeys tend to be found in fictional works, such as Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*.

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