

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 22

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On Couriers

I have been none of the least able in this exercise, which is proper for men of my pitch, well-knit and short; but I give it over; it shakes us too much to continue it long.

I was at this moment reading, that King Cyrus, the better to have news brought him from all parts of the empire, which was of a vast extent, caused it to be tried how far a horse could go in a day without baiting, and at that distance appointed men, whose business it was to have horses always in readiness, to mount those who were despatched to him; and some say, that this swift way of posting is equal to that of the flight of cranes.

Caesarsays, that Lucius Vibullius Rufus, being in great haste to carry intelligence to Pompey, rode night and day, still taking fresh horses for the greater diligence and speed; and he himself, as Suetonius reports, traveled a hundred miles a day in a hired coach; but he was a furious courier, for where the rivers stopped his way he passed them by swimming, without turning out of his way to look for either bridge or ford. Tiberius Nero, going to see his brother Drusus, who was sick in Germany, traveled two hundred miles in four-and-twenty hours, having three coaches.

In the war of the Romans against King Antiochus, T. Sempronius Gracchus, says Livy, *per dispositos equos prope incredibili celeritate ab Amphissa tertio die Pellam pervenit*. And it appears that they were established posts, and not horses purposely laid in upon this occasion.

Cecina's invention to send back news to his family was much more quick, for he took swallows along with him from home, and turned them out toward their nests when he would send back any news; setting a mark of some color upon them to signify his meaning, according to what he and his people had before agreed upon. At the theater at Rome masters of families carried pigeons in their bosoms to which they tied letters when they had a mind to send any orders to their people at home; and the pigeons were trained up to bring back an answer. D. Brutus made use of

By pre-arranged relays of horses, he, with an almost incredible speed, rode in three days from Amphissa to Pella. • LIVY, 37.7

the same device when besieged in Modena, and others elsewhere have done the same.

In Peru they rode post upon men, who took them upon their shoulders in a certain kind of litters made for that purpose, and ran with such agility that, in their full speed, the first couriers transferred their load to the second without making any stop.

I understand that the Wallachians, the grand Signior's couriers, perform wonderful journeys, by reason they have liberty to dismount the first person they meet upon the road, giving him their own tired horses; and that to preserve themselves from being weary, they gird themselves straight about the middle with a broad girdle; but I could never find any benefit from this.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Livy

Livy, *History of Rome*