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Once More on St Paul and the Dioscuri (Acts 28:11)

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ABSTRACT

This note offers a new explanation for the inclusion of the reference to the Dioscuri at Acts 28:11. It suggests that the reason for this inclusion is narratological rather than theological, to explain why the centurion in charge of Paul decided to board a ship at such an early date given the disastrous result of his previous decision to continue sailing during a period of heightened risk.

When Paul was being transported from the province of Judaea to Rome, his military escort used three different ships to complete this journey. The first ship, identified only as a ship from Adramyttium, took them from Caesarea in Judaea to Myra in Lycia (Acts 27:2–5). A second ship, identified only as a ship from Alexandria, took them from Myra to Malta (Acts 27:6–28:1). Finally, a third ship took them from Malta to Puteoli in Italy, on the bay of Naples, from which they continued overland to Rome. However, the author of Luke-Acts identifies this third ship not merely by its port of origin, but by the identity of its figurehead also, the Dioscuri:

> Μετὰ δὲ τρεῖς μῆνας ἀνήχθημεν ἐν πλοίῳ παρακεχειμακότι ἐν τῇ νήσῳ, Ἀλεξανδρίνῳ, παρασήμῳ Διοσκούροις. (Acts 28:11, NA28)
> After three months we set sail on an Alexandrian ship with the Dioscuri as its figurehead, that had spent the winter on the island.

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The question to be investigated here is why the author of Luke-Acts chose to identify this ship alone by both its port of origin and its figurehead.[1] All ships at this period bore their own figureheads and names, so that all three ships in this narrative ought to have had their separate figureheads and names.[2] Furthermore, since the ship that transported Paul during the final phase of his journey seems to have been a similar type of ship, a large grain transport, from the same port, Alexandria in Egypt, as that that had carried him during the second phase of his journey, it is difficult to understand how or why its figurehead should have drawn more attention than did that of the ship that carried him during this second phase.[3] At one level, the ship that finally brought Paul to Italy was different to the other ships in that it alone had completed the task of bringing him there, but the narrative devotes far less space to the final phase of the journey involving this ship than it does to the previous phase ending with the destruction of the ship that had brought him to Malta. Overall, therefore, one might have expected the author to let slip the name of the ship that had brought him to Malta rather than that of the one that had brought him to Puteoli.

There have been two main approaches to this problem. On the one hand, it is tempting to dismiss the identification of the figurehead in the case of the third ship as an incidental detail included by the author in his narrative with no greater intention in mind, although by so doing he reinforces his authority as an eyewitness to the events that he describes. This was the preferred interpretation in older commentaries.[4] Alternatively, the author may have chosen to include this detail in his narrative because of its usefulness as a symbol in support of some more complex literary or theological aim. This seems to be the most popular approach at present. As to the nature of such aims, one must first establish what the Dioscuri were most famous for in the Roman world by the late first and early second centuries CE before one can then understand what may have driven the author to mention them here.[5]

The Dioscuri, whose title means the 'Sons of Zeus', Castor and Pollux by name, enjoyed a widespread popular cult throughout the Greco-Roman world before the triumph of

[1] As David Ladouceur, 'Hellenistic Preconceptions of Shipwreck and Pollution as a Context for Acts 27-28', *HTR* 73 (1980), pp. 435–49, points out at 443–4 the fact that he does not mention the sign or name of a ship anywhere else in his text 'draws attention to this single exception'. Dennis R. MacDonald, 'The Shipwrecks of Odysseus and Paul', *NTS* 45 (1999), pp. 88–107, agrees: 'Luke never identified the figureheads of Paul's other ships, so his doing so here is significant' (p. 104). Similarly, Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary. Vol. 4: 24:1-28:31* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), p. 3696, n. 1432, claims that the fact 'that he mentions only this insignia and not those of other ships suggests that he does have a point here'. For a detailed discussion of this topic, see Knut Backhaus, 'Paulus und die Dioskuren (Apg 28.11): Über zwei denkwürdige Schutzpatrone des Evangeliums', *NTS* 61 (2015), pp. 165–82.

[2] See Lionel Casson, *Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 344–60.

[3] William M. Ramsay, *St Paul the Traveller* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1885), p. 346, further speculates that 'Luke mentions the name of the last vessel, but not of any of the others' because 'He heard the news of the last vessel before he saw it; but he became acquainted with the others by seeing them'.

[4] See e.g. Heinrich A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook of the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1883), p. 500; W. R. Nicoll (ed.), *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, vol. 2, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1897), p. 542. In a slight variation of the same, the author, or his source, may have deliberately included a reference to the figurehead of this ship to reinforce the impression of autopsy.

[5] On the popularity of their cult in the Roman world, see Amber Gartrell, *The Cult of Castor and Pollux in Ancient Rome: Myth, Ritual, and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

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Christianity and three main functions were generally attributed to them. First and foremost, they were the protectors of horsemen, in which role they were also protectors of the Roman state since they sometimes fought as cavalrymen in the Roman battle-line, after which they then conveyed the news of the Roman victory to the people of Rome more quickly than any human messenger could.[6] Second, they protected sailors and guaranteed safe passage by sea.[7] In this role, they were strongly associated with the meteorological phenomenon now known as St Elmo's fire which was regarded as a sign of their presence and protection as long as two such lights occurred.[8] Finally, they were symbols of fraternal harmony and *concordia* more generally and were sometimes used as such by emperors who sought to associate themselves, or their potential successors, with them in order to reassure the public either that there was no danger of civil war or that they, or their expected successors, possessed a virtuous character similar to that of the Dioscuri.[9]

As one considers the potential symbolic uses of the Dioscuri based on these functions, several possibilities suggest themselves. For example, there is a parallel between the occasional role of the Dioscuri as messengers who conveyed the good news to the Roman people after a Roman victory and the role of a ship named after them which transports Paul with the good news of the Christian faith to Rome. So, perhaps the inclusion of the reference to the Dioscuri when describing the third ship was intended to make some point to the effect that the Christian message was the real good news, and far better than any news that the Dioscuri had previously brought to Rome.[10] Next, and to focus on the role of the Dioscuri as protectors of those who travel by sea, the intention may have been to draw attention to the irony of their apparent protection of a traveller whose mission would eventually result in the destruction of their own cult.[11] Alternatively, some have chosen to emphasize that the Dioscuri did not protect everyone at sea, but only the blameless, so that the depiction of their safe conveyance of Paul to Italy may have been meant as a symbolic reaffirmation of his innocence of the charges against him.[12] Finally, to focus on the Dioscuri as symbols of fraternal harmony, it has been suggested that they may have symbolized 'the two groups of brothers, Jewish

[6] On their role as protectors of horsemen more generally, see Gartrell, *The Cult of Castor and Pollux*, pp. 115–32. They were alleged to have joined the Romans at the battle of Lake Regillus in 496 BCE and at the battle of Pydna in 168 BCE. On their role as protectors of the Roman state, see J. H. Richardson, 'The Dioscuri and the Liberty of the Republic', *Latomus* 72 (2013), pp. 901–18.

[7] See Gartrell, *The Cult of Castor and Pollux*, pp. 135–43.

[8] Pliny, *HN* 2.101; Seneca, *Nat. Quaes*. 1.1.13; Statius, *Silvae* 3.2.1–12.

[9] See Gartrell, *The Cult of Castor and Pollux*, pp. 145–93, for imperial use of the Dioscuri in this manner during the first century CE. For a later period also, see Gwynaeth McIntyre, 'Maxentius, the Dioscuri, and the Legitimisation of Imperial Power', *Antichthon* 52 (2018), pp. 161–80.

[10] Backhaus, 'Paulus und die Dioskuren', pp. 179–80, favours this interpretation.

[11] Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, p. 3696, detects another irony, arguing that 'Luke's theological point in mentioning the Dioscuri is, if anything, ironic: after God wrought a great deliverance, Paul's company sails on another ship that trusts in false gods'. Alternatively, the author may have intended an ironic comment upon the fact that a ship supposedly protected by the Dioscuri had nonetheless decided to spend the winter safely in harbour at Malta. See Lynn A. Kauppi, *Foreign but Familiar Gods: Greco-Romans Read Religion in Acts* (London: T & T Clark, 2006), p. 116.

[12] See Ladouceur, 'Hellenistic Preconceptions of Shipwreck', p. 449, claiming 'it is an important element in one closely-linked chain of arguments for Paul's innocence'; Daniel Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the Acts of the Apostles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 73; Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 745.

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and Christian' in symbolic reference to their position 'at the prow of God's mission to the world'.[13] It has also been argued that they were mentioned because of their association with the Julio-Claudian dynasty, and that their safe conveyance of Paul to Italy was intended to symbolize his eventual acquittal by the emperor Nero (54–68), the last ruler from this dynasty.[14]

None of these symbolic interpretations of the reference to the Dioscuri is impossible, but they are not of equal plausibility either and none of them is strictly necessary. As far as the plausibility of these interpretations is concerned, the context, the fact that the author attributes the name of the Dioscuri to a ship immediately causes the reader to think of the Dioscuri as protectors of sailors rather than in any of their other capacities. As for their necessity, there is in fact a much simpler explanation for the reference to the Dioscuri that better respects the immediate narrative context than does all this symbolic speculation. The key point here is that the ship with their name was resuming its voyage to Italy from Alexandria dangerously early during the sailing season. The approximate date of its resumption of its voyage can be calculated on the basis that the previous boat carrying Paul had set out from the harbour of Safe Havens to Phoenix in Crete sometime shortly after the fast associated with the Day of Atonement in late September or early October (Acts 27:9). This boat then spent at least 14 nights at sea (Acts 27:27), blown off course by a great storm, before it was shipwrecked off the coast of Malta. If Paul then spent three months on Malta, that means that at least three and a half months must have passed since the Day of Atonement by the time that he finally resumed his voyage to Italy, but probably not significantly much more than this. Therefore, it seems that he probably resumed his journey in late January or early February.[15]

Paul's resumption of his voyage in late January or early February is a problem because, according to the evidence of Vegetius, the seas were regarded as closed to sailing between 11 November and 10 March, and even after that sailing was still considered risky as late as 15 May.[16] While the problem is reduced if one prefers Pliny's evidence that the seas reopened to sailing on 8 February, the first day of spring by his calculation, it remains the case that the ship carrying Paul to Italy set sail either a week or two before the reopening of the seas or just after this reopening.[17] By even the most generous calculation, therefore, it was taking a risk when it set sail.[18] The important point here is that risk from storms did not suddenly disappear on the first day of Spring, but that it had reduced to a point where

[13] David Ravens, *Luke and the Restoration of Israel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), p. 246.

[14] See Craig S. de Vos, 'A Nicandrian Nero? The Symbolic Significance of the Viper in Acts 28.1-6', *NTS* 69 (2023), pp. 422–8, at 427.

[15] Although Paul says that the ship in which he departed 'had wintered' (παρακεχειμακότι) on the island, this term should not be pressed so far as to mean that the ship could only have departed in the spring after the whole of winter was over. It need not mean any more than that most of the winter was over. According to Varro (*Res Rusticae* 1.28), Winter began on 10 November and Spring on 7 February. Other Roman sources may vary slightly in their calculations of the beginnings of the seasons.

[16] Vegetius, *De Re Militari* 4.39.

[17] Pliny, *HN* 2.47.122.

[18] James Beresford, *The Ancient Sailing Season* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 39, n. 94, seeks to explain this contravention of the sailing season described by Vegetius on the basis that the 'large, round-hulled sailing ships of the early empire' were more seaworthy than the oared warships of late antiquity that Vegetius had in mind. The problem with this argument is that it is not clear what Vegetius' source for the sailing season was, or when and why it was composed.

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sailing was now considered feasible and would continue to reduce for a couple of months more. However, the owner or captain of a grain ship on the route between Alexandria and Italy may have felt commercial pressure to set sail as early as feasibly possible, to take a calculated risk.[19] In contrast, the centurion in command of Paul's escort would not have been subject to the same pressure. Given that he had made a bad choice once already when he had supported the owner of the previous ship in his decision to try to sail to Phoenix in Crete despite the late season (Acts 27:11), the reader might have expected him to act more cautiously on this occasion and to wait for another ship setting off at a less risky period. But he did not do so. Therefore, the reader is left mystified by his lack of caution, until the author reveals that the ship in which he intended to sail was named after the Dioscuri, the protectors of sea-travellers.[20] That was the final factor that decided the centurion in favour of taking what seemed at first sight to be another risky sea-journey, or so the reader is meant to realize. Considering the ubiquity of the cult of the Dioscuri by the first century CE, it is difficult to believe that the centurion would not have known of their reputation as protectors of sea-travellers, even if one cannot know how much faith he as an individual placed in their powers of protection.[21] Indeed, even if he did not place much faith in the Dioscuri themselves, he may well have regarded their depiction upon a ship as a good omen for travel in that ship. This assumes, of course, that there is some historical basis to the depiction of the centurion, and that he is not merely a literary construct.[22]

In conclusion, the author of Luke-Acts identifies the ship that conveyed Paul from Malta to Italy by its figurehead not to make some subtle theological point but to answer the implicit question of why the centurion in charge of Paul dared to board a ship sailing at such a risky period, given his recent experience of the very real dangers of sailing at a time of increased risk. The answer to this implicit question is that the centurion had been persuaded to do so by the name of the ship that he boarded which suggested that it enjoyed the protection of the Dioscuri, gods with a special interest in the protection of those who travelled by sea. Hence the inclusion of this detail serves a primarily narratological rather than theological purpose. This is not to deny the possibility that the reference to the Dioscuri may conceal some other potential symbolic meaning also, but to suggest that, if any such exists, it is of secondary importance at best.

[19] In 51 CE, the threat of famine at Rome had forced Claudius to take various measures to encourage grain transport even during the winter (Suet. *Claud.* 18–19). For further discussion, see André Tchernia, *The Romans and Trade* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 211–19.

[20] Beresford, *The Ancient Sailing Season*, p. 39, claims that 'there is nothing in the text of Acts to suggest that the voyage from Malta was considered to be an unusually early departure'. I suggest that the need felt to mention the Dioscuri here to explain both why the centurion felt confident to board this ship and why the owner or captain dared to set sail at such an early date in the first place supplies the missing proof that this voyage was indeed considered to be 'an unusually early departure'.

[21] Of most relevance here, it has been argued that Pontius Pilate may have built a pair of lighthouses at Caesarea in Judaea, the *Tiberieum* and the *Druseium*, named after the emperor Tiberius and his brother Drusus, in accordance with their association with the Dioscuri. See Gartrell, *The Cult of Castor and Pollux*, pp. 171–2.

[22] The name of the centurion, Julius, has encouraged speculation that he may serve as a symbol of the *gens Julia*, the imperial dynasty, if not of Rome itself. See Christopher B. Zeichmann, *The Roman Army and the New Testament* (London: Lexington Books, 2018), p. 90.

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