



VIA APPIA ANTICA (THE APPIAN WAY)

This month's essay is a bit different from my recent ones. At the suggestion of Cenacolista John Shook, I have decided to write about one of the most important "roads" of the ancient world. The Appian Way was constructed by the ancient Romans to connect Rome to parts of its expanding empire. It has changed significantly through its two millennia of existence. It was the site of important historical events, and today it serves as an important archaeological site in addition to being an important destination for visitors to Rome and central Italy.

The few roads that led outside early Rome were Etruscan and went relatively short distances, mainly to Etruria, about three miles from Rome. By the late Republic, the Romans had expanded over most of Italy and were masters of road construction. *Via Appia Antica* (Appian Way) was the ancient Roman Republic's first long road, and later, during the Roman Empire, it was strategically the most important long road in the entire Empire. The road was built primarily for the purpose of transporting military supplies and troops. The Appia Antica and other roads built during the late Republic and Empire began at Rome, where the master *itinerarium* (itinerary or list) of destinations along the roads was located, and extended to the borders of Rome's domain — hence the expression, "All roads lead to Rome."

THE NEED FOR THE APPIA ANTICA

Around 343 BC, Rome and Capua attempted to form an alliance, a first step toward closer military cooperation between the two cities. Dense populations of Samnites, an ancient people who lived in south-central Italy in the mountains north of Capua just north of the



Greek city of Neapolis (present-day Naples) reacted with military force against the formation of the alliance. In the First Samnite War (343–341 BC), the Romans found they could not move, support, or resupply their troops in the field against the Samnites. This was because between Capua and Rome lay the *Pomptinae paludes* (Pontine Marshes), a swamp infested with malaria. (The marsh remained, despite many efforts over the centuries to drain it, until engineers working for Benito Mussolini in the 1920s and '30s finally succeeded in doing so, and created agricultural fields for families uprooted by the depression. However, the fields continued to be infested with malarial mosquitos until the advent of DDT in the 1950s.) There was also a tortuous coastal road, *Via Latina* (Latin Way) that wound between Ostia at the mouth of the Tiber and Neapolis. This road followed its ancient and scarcely more accessible path along the foothills of Monti Laziali and Monti Lepini, which tower over the marsh. A revolt

of about 30 villages and tribes in the region of Latium near ancient Rome, organized for mutual defense) drained Rome's resources further, so they gave up the attempted alliance and settled with the Samnites.

However, the Romans were only biding their time while they looked for a solution to the movement and supply problems. The first answer was the *colonia* (colony), comprised of settlers from Rome, who would maintain a permanent base of operations. The Second Samnite War (327–304 BC) erupted when Rome attempted to place a colony at Cales in 334 and again at Fregellae in 328 on the other side of the marshes. The Samnites, who were now a major power after defeating the Greeks of Tarentum, occupied Neapolis to try to ensure its loyalty. The Neapolitans appealed to Rome, which sent an army and expelled the Samnites from Neapolis.

Construction on the first section of Appia Antica began in 312 BC during the Second Samnite war. The road ultimately achieved its purpose of giving a favorable outcome to Rome in the war by allowing the Romans to concentrate their forces rapidly and to keep them adequately supplied. Thus, the Romans were able to reverse their fortunes in a series of blows that brought Etruria to the peace table in 311 BC and Samnium in 304 BC.

THE *LONGARUM REGINA VIARUM* (“QUEEN OF THE LONG ROADS”) – AS DESCRIBED BY THE ROMAN POET STATIUS IN HIS WORK, *SILVAE*

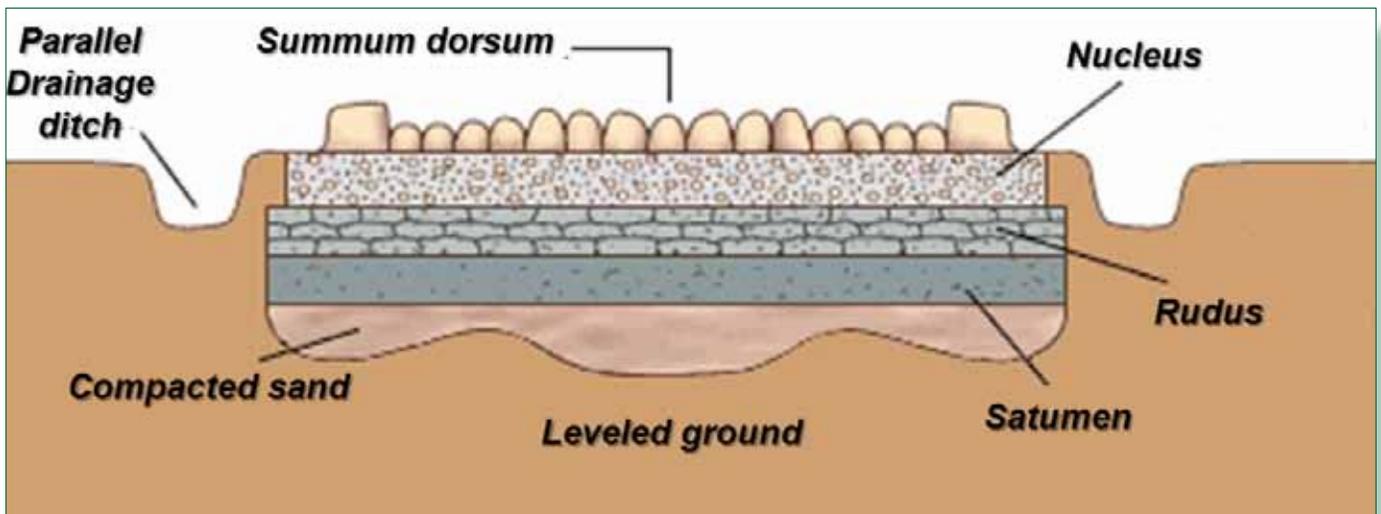


Appia Antica was named for Appius Claudius Caecus, who laid the first 56 miles of road and was responsible for not only overseeing the first part of the project, but for masterminding the whole idea. Caecus began his political career as a Censor (a government official in the Republic). He was placed in charge of the public purse, and was notorious for beginning public works projects without first consulting with the Senate. Aside from Appia Antica, he also ordered the construction of the first Roman aqueduct, *Aqua Appia (below)*, thus securing Rome’s water supply. (In typical Roman fashion, as you can see, he named both projects after himself)!

At first, it ran only approximately 135 miles from the center of Rome (at the Roman forum) south-southeast to ancient Capua, in Campania. (From Rome its course was almost straight southward until it reached Tarracina (Terracina) on the Tyrrhenian Sea. The road then turned inland to the southeast to reach Capua, 16 miles north of Naples). Around 244 BC, the road was extended another 240 miles. From Capua, it ran east to Beneventum (Benevento) and then southeast again to reach the port of Tarentum (Taranto). It then ran east for a short distance to reach its final destination at Brundisium (Brindisi), a port city on the Adriatic Sea in the Apulia region that was situated in the “heel” of Italy.



The whole project was completed by 190 BC. Built to withstand the ravages of time, Appia Antica was constructed using clever Roman engineering methods and materials. Construction started with a leveled dirt road averaging 20 feet in width. Upon this, small stones and lime cement mortar were laid. (This was the first Roman road to feature the use of lime cement). Gravel was laid upon this, and the gravel was finally topped with tight fitting, interlocking, polygonal blocks of lava that were smoothly and expertly fitted together to provide a flat surface. (The historian Procopius said that the stones were fitted together so securely and closely that they appeared to have grown together rather than being manually fitted together). The lava blocks formed a good traveling surface, and one that proved to have extraordinary durability over the centuries. The road was cambered in the middle (to allow for runoff of water) and had ditches protected by retaining walls on either side of the road.

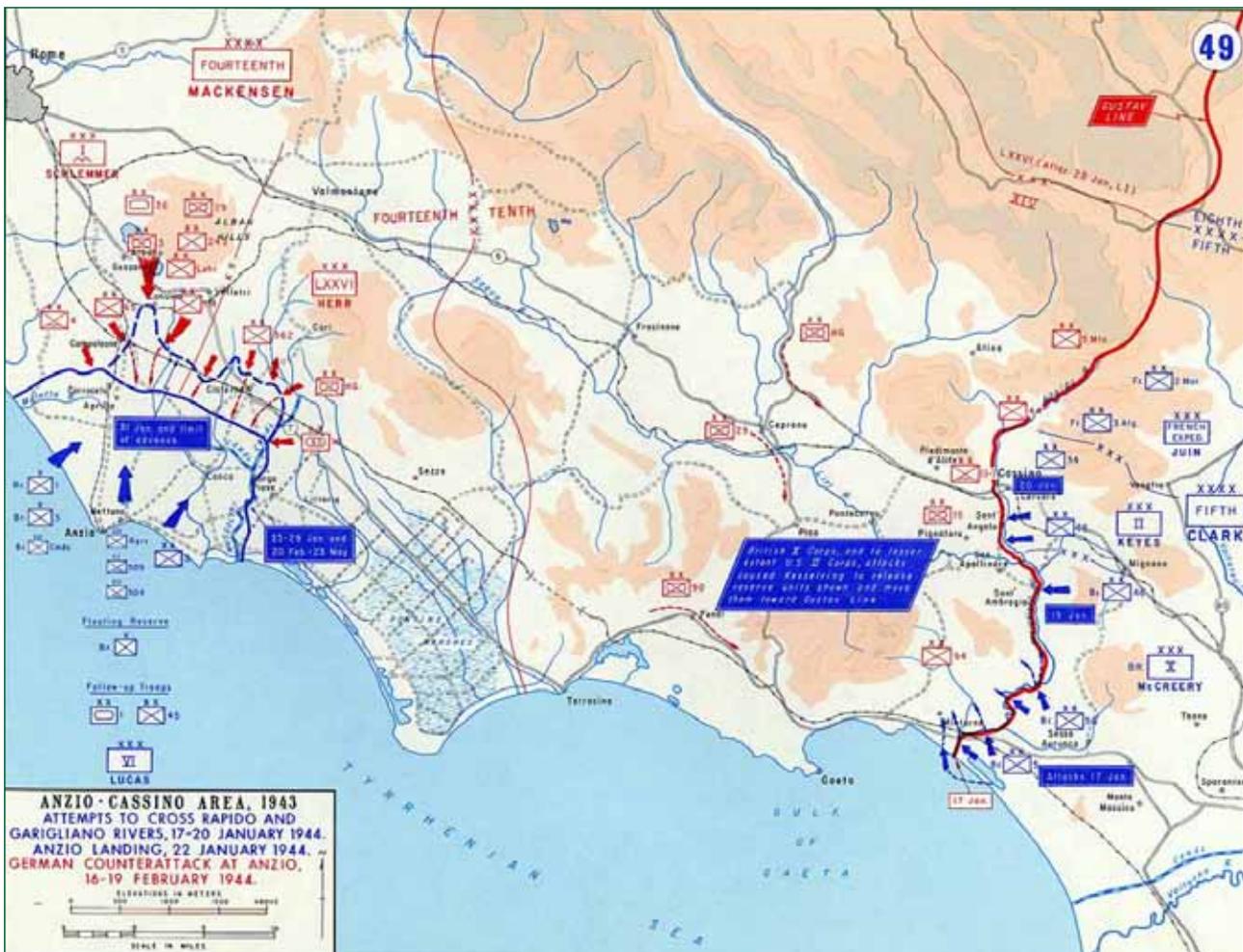


While Appia Antica was initially built as a military supply route, the road has been the battlefield for more than one important war. Perhaps the most well-known event on the road involved the ex-gadiator Spartacus. In 73 BC, Spartacus led a slave revolt (The Third Servile War) against the empire. This uprising was significant because slaves accounted for about one-third of Italy's entire population. It began when 70 slave-gladiators escaped from a gladiator school, and over a period of two years they were joined by 120,000 others willing to fight for their cause. During the revolt, small groups of the rebels traveled all over Italy, raiding estates and towns. They also defeated several Roman legions. In 71 BC while trying to escape from Italy at the port city of Brindisi, where Appia Antica ended, Spartacus and 6,000 of his rebels unwittingly moved into Apulia-Calabria. Here, they were trapped between two Roman legions formed by troops from around the whole empire. The rebels were captured and the revolt was completely destroyed. As punishment, the Romans brutally crucified every one of the rebels along a 125-mile stretch of Appia Antica from Rome to near Capua.



“The Death of Spartacus” by Hermann Vogel (1882)

Another important battle took place along the Appia Antica in 1943 during World War II, the Battle of Anzio. The Allies were hoping to break a stalemate at Monte Cassino, and landed on the coast of Italy at Nettuno (ancient Antium) which is midway between Ostia and Terracina. They found that the place was undefended, so they made plans to move along the line of the Appia Antica to take Rome, thereby outflanking Monte Cassino. However, they did not do so quickly enough. The Germans occupied Mounts Laziali and Lepini along the track of the old Via Latina section of the Appia Antica, from which they rained down shells on Anzio. Even though the Allies expanded into the entire Pomptine region, they gained no ground. The Germans counterattacked down the Appia Antica from the Alban hills in a front that was four miles wide, but could not retake Anzio. The battle lasted for four months, one side being supplied by sea (the Allies), the other by land through Rome (the Germans). In May 1944, the Allies broke out of Anzio and moved up Appia Antica to finally take Rome. The German forces escaped to the north of Florence.



Force dispositions at Anzio and Cassino January / February 1944

MORE RECENT HISTORY

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the road fell out of use for many centuries. Pope Pius VI in the 1780s ordered its restoration. A new Appian Way was built parallel to the old one in 1784 as far as the Alban Hills region. The new road was called the *Via Appia Nuova* (New Appian Way) as opposed to the old section, which maintained its name, *Via Appia Antica*. The Appia Antica close to Rome is now a free tourist attraction. It was extensively restored for Rome's Millennium and Great Jubilee celebrations during the 1990s. The first three miles are still heavily used by cars, buses and coaches but from then on traffic is very light and the ruins can be explored on foot or by bicycle in relative safety.

In 1951, the construction of the ring road around Rome, the *Grande Raccordo Anulare* or GRA (Great Ring Road), resulted in the Appia Antica being cut in two. More recent improvements to the GRA have rectified this through the construction of a tunnel under the Appia Antica, so that it is now possible to follow the Appia on foot for about 10 miles from its beginning near the Baths of Caracalla. Many parts of the original road beyond Rome's environs have been preserved, and some are now used by cars (for example, in the area of Velletri). To this day, the Appia Antica contains the longest stretch of straight road in Europe, totaling 39 miles. (The road inspired the final movement of Ottorino Respighi's *Pini di Roma* (Pines of Rome), a four-movement symphonic poem composed in 1924).

PRESENT-DAY SITES ALONG THE APPIA ANTICA

Appian Way Regional Park-- an archaeological park covering about 10 miles of the Appia Antica. The roadside views along the road have hardly changed since antiquity, with farmland still filled with sheep as well as the mausoleums of Roman nobles, which once bore epitaphs such as "I advise you to enjoy life more than I did" and "Beware of doctors: they were the ones who killed me."

The Church of Domine Quo Vadis, also called *Chiesa di Santa Maria delle Piante* (Church of St. Mary of the Plants)—is in the second mile of the road. It was built in 1637 on the site where legend has it that Saint Peter met Jesus while the former was fleeing persecution in Rome. According to the legend, Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, where are you going?" (Latin: *Domine, quo vadis?*). Jesus answered, "I am going to Rome to be crucified again." (Latin: *Eo Romam iterum crucifigi*). After this encounter, Peter turned around and returned to Rome, where he was subsequently crucified upside down.



Catacombs—Roman law forbade the burial of bodies inside the city. So, burial sites and, for the wealthy, mausoleums were located especially along the Appia Antica, since it was the major road leaving Rome. Along or close to the part of the road closest to Rome, there are three catacombs of Roman and early Christian origin and one of Jewish origin. Also, during times of persecution, persecuted religions held their religious services in secret in the catacombs. Today, one can visit several catacombs, the most famous of which are the Catacomb of Callixtus (*below*), the Catacomb of Saint Sebastian, and the Vigna Randanini Jewish catacombs.



Other Sites—Porta Appia (Porta San Sebastiano), which is the gate of the Aurelian Walls; Tomb of Priscilla; Hypogeum (or ancient underground burial site) of Vibia; Circus of Maxentius; Tomb of Caecilia Metella; Roman baths of Capo di Bove; Villa dei Quintili, with nymphaeum (a grotto with springs dedicated to the nymphs), theater, and baths; Villa of Publius Clodius Pulcher (in the Villa Santa Caterina, owned by the Pontifical North American College, where many US Catholic priests have been developed); Tres Tabernae (Three Booths); Villa of Pompey; and many other places.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: *Bible Study* website; *Encyclopedia Britannica* website; Hengel, Livia. "A Brief History Of Via Appia Antica, Rome's Oldest Road." *The Culture Trip* website, October 15, 2016; Perrottet, Tony. "The Glory that is Rome." *Smithsonian Magazine* website, October, 2005; *Rome.us* website; *What a Life Tours* website; and *Wikipedia*.