

The *Via Severiana* and its Representation in the *Tabula Peutingeriana*

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Abstract – We will examine the route of the *Via Severiana*, traced in the imperial period, from a historical and technical point of view, then we will compare it with the *Tabula*, which we can consider one of the first synthetic representations of general viability. In this work we have examined the development of the various sectors of the *via Severiana*, considering the various utility and presence on the territory, using the *Tabula Peutingeriana* as a benchmark.

Keywords – *Via Severiana, Tabula Peutingeriana, Accuracy.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Political, economic, and social life during the centuries of the Empire revolved around the *Urbe*. Rome was the seat of imperial authority and administration, the main place of commercial exchange between East and West as well as being by far the most populated city in the ancient world with around one million inhabitants; for this reason, thousands of people flocked to the capital every day by sea and by land, enriching it with artists and men of letters from all regions of the Empire. The ancient Romans built long roads to connect the most distant provinces with the capital of the empire. Made as straight as possible to minimize distances, these infrastructures were essential for the growth of the empire, as they allowed the army to move quickly, but as well as for military purposes they were also used for political, administrative, and commercial purposes. The Roman Road network constituted the most efficient and long-lasting road system of the ancient times, which made it possible to bring Roman civilization into contact with the most diverse peoples who populated the known world at the time. No other people in that historical era were able to match their ability to choose routes, construction techniques and the organization of assistance to travelers. We will examine the *Via Severiana* and the oldest cartographic reference system, the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, from a technical point of view [1-11].

II. VIA SEVERIANA

A. *Septimius Severus*

Lucius Septimius Severus (11 April 145 – 4 February 211) was born in Leptis Magna (present-day Al-Khums, Libya) in the Roman province of Africa. As a young man, he advanced through the customary succession of offices under the reigns of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus. Severus seized power after the death of the emperor Pertinax in 193 during the Year of the Five Emperors.



Fig. 1. The *Via Severiana* near Castel Fusano.

He had been acclaimed emperor by the legions of *Pannonia* (modern Hungary) and had then obtained the recognition of the senate. The emperor was a rude and hard soldier, who had risen with valor and tenacity to the highest ranks of the army. He decisively transformed the empire

into a military monarchy. He had no sympathy for Roman and Italian elements: he in fact disbanded the Praetorian Guard, which was composed of Italians, and reformed it, with soldiers drawn from the provinces; and he took away from Italy any residue of administrative autonomy. Once the civil wars had subsided after the Parthians had been defeated, order was restored to the empire by the arms of the new emperor, who was therefore able to entrust the great jurist Papiniano with the enormous task of a general reorganization of Roman legislation. Septimius Severus assumed the authoritarian attitudes of an oriental monarch, and, thanks to the influence of his wife, who was a Syrian, introduced oriental cults into the imperial palace. The soldier emperor died worthily in Britain, while campaigning in those remote regions (211).

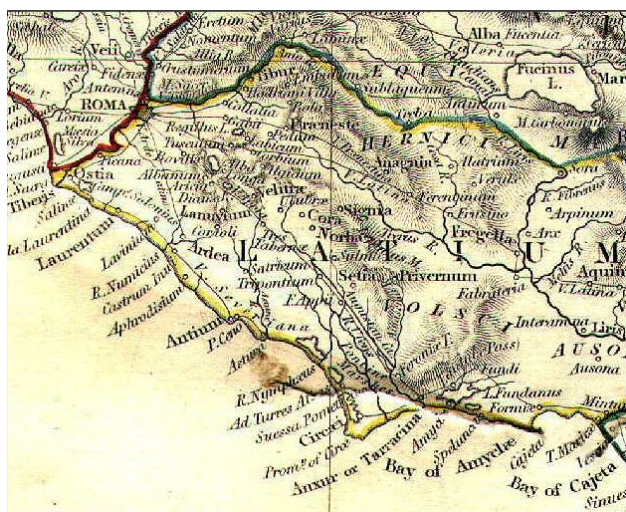


Fig. 2. Reference map for Roman Empire Regium I: Latium et Campania (William Robert Shepherd - The Historical Atlas by William R. Shepherd, 1911 - detail)

B. Via Severiana

The Via Severiana was an ancient Roman road that connected Portus (today's Fiumicino) with Terracina.

It was built in 198 by the emperor Septimius Severus (from whom it takes its name), who probably limited himself to connecting and paving stretches of pre-existing roads along the Lazio coast. The road, about 80 Roman miles long (~118 km), started from the port of Portus at the mouth of the Tiber, crossed Ostia, the Stagno di Ostia, the Vicus Augustanus, Laurentum, Lavinium (now Pratica di Mare), Anzio and Astura (now Torre Astura), to then reach Tarracina (now Terracina). The road is indicated in the Tabula Peutingeriana, where some localities are indicated including: Laurentum, Lavinium, Astura, Clostris, ad Turres Albas, Circeios (on the Circeo near Torre Paola), Ad Turres (Torre Vittoria). Initially built for commercial purposes, to bring the lime necessary for the maintenance of the port of Ostia more comfortably from the Lepini mountains, the road soon became the main access road to the numerous villas that the Roman notables had built as residences summer on the Roman coast. According to another measurement also deduced from the testimony of

the chronicler of the Third Crusade, in August 1190 Richard the Lionheart traveled a stretch of paved road that crossed a forest, identified with the via Severiana of the length of *quater viginti miliaria*, that is, twenty-four miles, equal to just over 35.5 kilometers which correspond to the distance, according to an almost straight path, between Porto and the area of Tor San Lorenzo near which *Castrum Inui* once stood.



Fig. 3. The beginning of the Via Severiana (red) near the Necropolis of Isola Sacra (From "Arte e civiltà nell'Italia Antica." 1960 TCI).

Thomas Ashby said that it would have run along the shore only at first: just behind the line of villas which fronted the sea – which are now some 1 km inland – or even upon its edge (for an inscription records its being damaged by the waves); farther southeast the road would seem to have kept rather more distant from the shore, and it probably kept within the lagoons below the Circean promontory.

III. TABULA PEUTINGERIANA

A. Konrad Peutinger

Konrad Peutinger was a German humanist (Augsburg 1465 - 1547). He studied law in Padua and was then also in Rome; back home, the emperor Maximilian appointed him imperial adviser. Antiquarian, publisher of historians (Giordano and Paolo Diacono, 1515) and of Latin inscriptions (1520); the *Tabula Peutingeriana* takes its name from him. Peutinger would have liked to publish the Tabula, but he died before succeeding. The code handed down to her is kept in Austria, at the Hofbibliothek in Vienna, from which the name of *Codex Vindobonensis* attributed to the witness derives. There is also a black and white copy in the archives of the *Cartothèque De l'Institut Géographique National*, in Paris, while another reproduction is kept in the underground museum of the *Pula Arena* in Istria. Its dating and provenance are uncertain. In 2007 it was included by UNESCO in the Memory of the World Register.

B. The Tabula Peutingeriana

The *Tabula Peutingeriana* (Latin for "The Peutinger Map"), is a 12th-13th century copy of an ancient Roman map showing the roadways of the Roman Empire, from the British Isles to the Mediterranean region and from the Middle East to the Indies and Central Asia; its westernmost section is now lost. Technically is a map of the type of

military itineraries, kept in the former imperial map library in Vienna, drawn on a strip of parchment, 6.80 m in 12 segments (the first has been lost). The author has developed only the west-east line in the drawing, folding roads, coasts, rivers from other directions onto it, reducing the north-south line, but maintaining the itinerary elements.

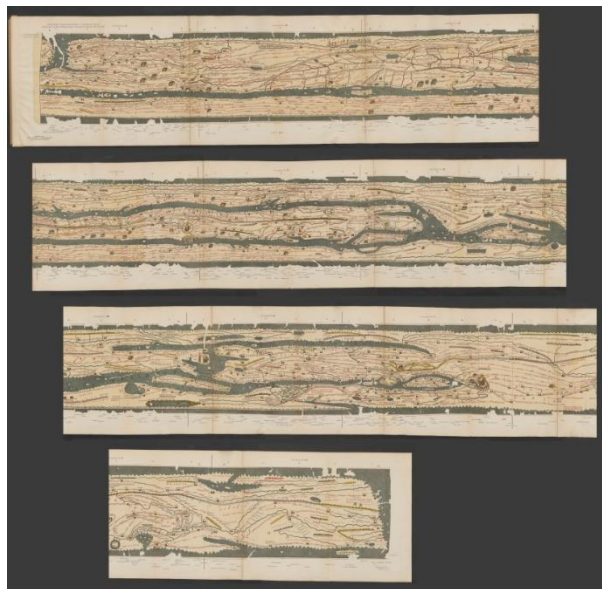


Fig. 4. The Tabula Peutingeriana properly separated (for a clearer representation)

The panel was handed over for publication after being found in 1507 by the Viennese humanist C. Celtis. It was published complete in 1598. Believed by some to be medieval, by others much older, today it is considered a medieval copy of a charter from the imperial age. The Tabula is probably a copy of a model from the Carolingian age, which in turn dates to the original of a Roman road map. It is constructed as a schematic representation and the geographic conditions - except for a few details - are highly distorted. However, it provided travellers with all relevant information on the location of the most important cities and stopping places (*mansio*) of the road network of the Roman Empire, as well as the series of daily stops on the main travel routes. The territories are represented by horizontal bands, separated by the Mediterranean Sea and the Adriatic. Cities are indicated with building icons, the convention being that the larger the symbol, the more important the city. The daily milestones are represented by the segmentation of red lines. The indications of ancient toponyms and distances in Roman miles form the foundation for scientific research on Roman roads. The map is today one of the most important sources for the classification and identification of ancient toponyms.

IV. VIA SEVERIANA AND THE TABULA

Today, only a few visible traces remain of the ancient road. Some fragments of the paving used to pave the road are visible inside the pine forest of Castel Fusano and in Ostia in the pine forest near the *Canale dei Pescatori* on the

road that leads to Ostia Antica. Other remains are visible in the necropolis of Isola Sacra.

A. *The Isola Sacra part*

Inside a triangle of land, known in the past as Isola Sacra, stands the ancient Necropolis of Porto, a suggestive archaeological site a stone's throw from Fiumicino to Leonardo Da Vinci Airport. The island, which is bordered by the Tiber River to the southeast, the Fiumicino canal to the north and the Tyrrhenian Sea to the west, was called *Insula Portuensis* in ancient Roman times but in the 6th century AD, due to the strong Christian presence in the territory, acquired the nickname of "Sacred".

The city of Porto, around the 1st century BC it achieved great development and above all thanks to its proximity to the Port of Claudius it gradually replaced the ancient city of Ostia as the main support for maritime activities. The island was crossed by an important road, the Via Flavia Severiana, which connected the city of Porto with ancient Ostia. It was precisely the inhabitants of Porto who built the Necropolis on the side of the road. The floods of the Tiber and the consequent silting up of the entire area have allowed an excellent conservation of the tombs, with their characteristic pink colour.

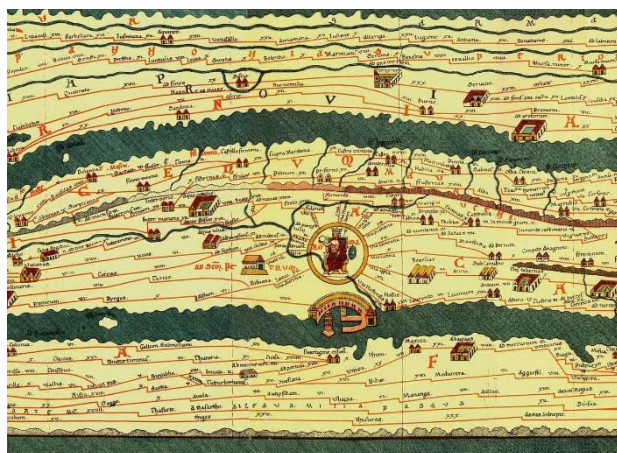


Fig. 5. General sector of the Tabula, which contains Rome and the Via Severiana.

B. *The villas part*

Along the Via Severiana, after the Stagno di Ostia, there were a series of residential villas that followed one another along the coast, from the so-called "Palombara" area up to Torvaianica. Most of these villas pre-existed the road as they mostly dated back to the late republican period. Back then the sea was further away than today and the villas were immersed in the Mediterranean scrub that covered the area. The villa of *Quintus Hortensius Hortalus*, a Roman orator who lived at the time of *Cicero*, is located in the Palombara area. The first findings in the area date back to 1713, subsequent excavations carried out in the early 1800s by the Chigi family, then owners of the area, and then in 1933-34, brought to light most of the remains of the villa, which are still visible today. These finds were for a long time

associated with the villa of *Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus* (Pliny the Younger). Only recently, in 1984, the remains have been attributed to the villa of *Hortensius*, while the villa of *Plinius* is believed to be located in the presidential estate of Castel Porziano, in the so-called *Villa Magna* in the locality of Grotte di Piastra. It should be noted that over the centuries the coastline has advanced by about 600 metres: this has led to a progressive burial of all the artefacts and the aggression by the colonizing plants of the dunes.



Fig. 6. Rome and the Via Severiana in the Tabula Peutingeriana.

C. The Swamps Part

The construction of the road also presented many difficulties for the skilled Roman engineers, due to the numerous watercourses, which, descending from the inland mountains, especially in the *Pomptinus Ager* (Pontine Marshes) area, often became marshy before flowing into the sea. The technique used to overcome this type of obstacle was that of driving wooden pillars into the ground and subsequently filling the space between the pillars with large stones which were then strongly compressed and further filled with earth to form raised embankments of one or two meters compared to the level of the swamp, on which the road was later built.

D. The Circeo part

The road is illustrated by the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, where, as far as the Circeo is concerned, two important stations were indicated: "Circeios" (near Torre Paola) and *Ad Turres* (probably in Torre Vittoria). The series of stations that follow one another from Astura to Terracina can be summarized in the following Table 1:

Table 1. Ancient Stations

Station	Distance	
Astura	VII miglia	Km. 10,400
Clostris	IX miglia	Km. 13,400
ad Turres albas	III miglia	Km. 4,500
Circeios	XII miglia	Km. 18,000
Ad Turres	IV miglia	Km. 6,000
Terracina	IX miglia	Km. 16,300

Other studies place the 'Ad Turres' station near the current Torre Olevola instead of Torre Vittoria: "From

Astura to *Clostra* in the Charter they read nine miles, distance, if exact, determines the station of the Fogliano maquis, four miles distant from the walls of San Donato, which, in this case, would correspond to the following station called Ad Turres Albas, however correcting the number of III of the Charter in VIII. Circejo is placed XIX miles distant from Turres Albas so that by measuring the space between San Donato and the ruins of Circejo on the mountain of the same name commonly called Santa Felicita, one counts at least XXIII miles, and therefore the number XIX in the map must be corrected. Four miles are placed on the Map, which roughly coincide with the Tower of Olevola or a little further. From this point to Terracina, the Map places XI miles but there are barely IX miles. The resulting Table 2 is as follows:

Table 2. Modern Stations

Ancient station	Distance	New Position
Asturam	VII miglia	Torre Astura
Clostra	IX miglia	?
Ad Turres Albas	IV miglia	San Donato
Circeios	XXIII miglia	Torre Paola
Ad Turres	IV miglia	Torre Olevola
Terracinam	IX miglia	Terracina

The original route of the Severiana probably followed the current coastal road Borgo Grappa - Molella - San Felice. The byway, on the other hand, reached the port area of Torre Paola, *Circeios* flanked by various sepulchres, some of which are still visible in the locality of Selva Piana. The road continued, in the main stretch, along the mountain up to Torre Vittoria (perhaps Torre Olevola) from where it continued towards Terracina.



Fig. 7. The Va Severiana in the Tabula Peutingeriana (detail).

V. MAP PRECISION

The precision of the *Tabula*, (i.e., whether the positions coincide with the real ones), is beyond question: the number of travellers who have used it over the centuries is so high and the "returns from the field" have been so high that the distances can be considered reliable. This does not mean that the centuries have in any case taken their toll on the document and, despite him, the inaccuracies are to be attributed to various factors: in all cases, we can consider the absolute invariance of the Severiana, i.e., its layout has not changed at all over the centuries. A short list of reasons for inaccuracy follows.

A. *The "Floating Stations"*

The stations must lie next to the Severiana, but human and historical events (wars, famines, etc.) and meteorological factors (floods, landslides etc.) may have moved the precise position of the building or complex that was designed to welcome travellers. This "fluctuating" movement may have been carried out several times throughout the passage of time making it difficult to geolocate the station today.

B. *The Ghost Station*

For the same reasons discussed in the previous point, many stations may have simply been abandoned. Additional causes could be the swamping of the area and the consequent unhealthy air. Another could be the abandonment of the countryside or adjacent inhabited centres, which made the supply extremely difficult or impossible.

C. *Urbanization of the Station*

Basically, it is the opposite of the previous point: simple post stations become rather populous towns: the service to the passenger therefore becomes much more varied, widespread, and multiplied across multiple suppliers. It is not uncommon for inns to multiply in these towns, the exchange of horses and, if very populous, we also have the appearance of several brothels.

D. *The Fall from Grace*

It is also necessary to consider the variation in importance of the station: over the centuries, with the movement of people and the variation of the surrounding countryside, localities that were very important in the first centuries, declined for social or political reasons, being reduced to simple agglomerations of houses that all worked depending on the passage of travellers.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

We have examined the route of the Via Severiana, traced in the imperial period, from a historical and technical point of view. Later we have compared it with the Tabula, which we can consider one of the first synthetic representations of general viability. The comparison between the study of the route with the Tabula shown as the difference between them is very small and this demonstrates as the Tabula can be applied even today.

The Roman precision in laying out roads meant that, over the centuries, there was no refinement from a measurement point of view: further proof of their precision. Obviously, the perception of maps and geographical maps in the imperial era was the result of a dual military and commercial approach, certainly not geographical: this is why the "synoptic" tracing of the Tabula was born which

has the precise purpose of determining marching distances of the army and transit time for goods and cargo. Once appropriately georeferenced, the Tabula provides us with surprising precision: we use the term "surprising" because we consider the measuring instruments of the Roman era which are far from the precision of maps of theodolites served by satellites. The difference that we find in the end are all of an anthropic nature or rather the various centres of human aggregation have been affected by the various secular "tides" of history, which enhance or destroy a possible inhabited centre.

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