

Arnold Esch, **Zwischen Antike und Mittelalter. Der Verfall des römischen Straßensystems in Mittelitalien und die Via Amerina**. Publisher C. H. Beck, Munich 2011. 208 pages with 184 illustrations, 7 maps.

In 1997, Arnold Esch published his book »Römische Straßen in ihrer Landschaft. Das Nachleben antiker Strassen (sic) um Rom. Mit Hinweisen zur Begehung im Gelände« (Mainz 1997). Here, Esch enumerates five sections of Roman roads in Central Italy: the Via Appia, the Via Cassia, the Via Flaminia, the Via Salaria and the Via Valeria. These descriptions follow the same concept: a walking route follows the trace of the former road, based on detailed survey-maps; in addition, a meticulous description is given of the ancient history and archaeology of the road section and the surrounding landscape. The publication is richly illustrated: besides the survey-maps, there are also photos of the landscape and the road sections themselves and sometimes also illustrations of objects situated along the roads in present or in original times.

»Zwischen Antike und Mittelalter« takes a different form. It is actually divided into two independent parts, although the title only suggests one. The first part is a general historical overview concerning the decline and fall of the entire Roman road system in Central Italy; the

second part is a walking tour along the Via Amerina, described in the same way as the Roman road sections in »Römische Straßen«. Although the two parts are connected, the differences between them are striking.

The first part, »Straßen um Rom zwischen Antike und Mittelalter« describes the Central-Italian road system mainly from a historical point of view. It aims to answer the question how the busy, well-maintained and straight road system around the city of Rome – an interregional network connecting the different parts of Italy, still well-functioning in the fourth century A. D. – transformed into a fragmented road system where the interregional functions and connections were lost, and deteriorated into a system of primitively repaired local roads and even into sandy tracks.

Esch shows how between the fourth and eighth century people must have witnessed the gradual deterioration of the road system and the facilities along the roads. In the first instance, the roads are still repaired and maintained provisionally, but during the increasing political disturbance in Italy, the importance of road repair decreased. In the fifth and sixth centuries especially, the condition of the road system deteriorates quickly, and in the seventh and eighth centuries, large parts of it are inaccessible or even have disappeared; not only due to long overdue maintenance, but also because of natural forces such as subsidence, floods and overgrowing. Surface material of former parts of the road system, no longer accessible or in use, was removed for other purposes; the material was, of course, useful for new buildings. Moreover, a well-functioning road system was not only no longer suitable or desirable, but even undesirable: the unity of the Roman Empire with its central capital was now altered into an area where brutal invaders could use a well-functioning and straight road system for their own purposes. So, why maintain a long-distance infrastructure at great expense?

Esch then discusses the altered situation of the roads: they no longer offer the shortest distance between two important economic centres, but now they connect as many settlements and (former) cities as possible. Inevitably, the roads and the travelling times become longer. The length of the road system increases because the roads are no longer straight but winding, evading natural obstacles like slopes of hills and mountains, and rivers.

Along the new mediaeval roads, new settlements, churches and chapels arose. Many former Roman roads were abandoned and isolated, because they no longer functioned as thoroughfares. Illustration 23 (p. 28) shows a small church, built precisely on a bridge on the old Via Flaminia. In and around Rome, the traffic function of the road system was maintained over a longer period of time, but after losing its dominant function of metropolis, Rome became a regional economic centre, and the needs, products and services came from the surrounding area. In the fourth century, hundreds of thousands of Romans were still supplied with corn, meat

and olive oil – up until the fifth century corn was imported from Africa –, but some centuries later, Rome was transformed into a village of peasants, living amongst buildings and temples slowly turning into ruins. Although every classicist and historian knows that the Roman Empire came to an end, making way for the Dark Middle Ages, some illustrations are confrontational. Figure 27 (p. 35) shows a small farm at the Forum of Nerva. Totila's threat – during his siege of Rome – to change the city into a meadow for cattle finally became reality. Other images, showing agriculture in the centre of Rome, are also used in another publication of A. Esch, *Straßenzustand und Verkehr in Stadtgebiet und Umgebung Roms im Übergang von der Spätantike zum Frühmittelalter* (5.–8. Jahrhundert). In: D. Mertens, *Stadtverkehr in der antiken Welt. Internationales Kolloquium zur 175-Jahrfeier des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Rom*, 21. bis 23. April 2004 (Wiesbaden 2008) 228 (Kaiserfora, Imperial Fora). These illustrations show an idyllic picture, but also a picture of ruins, depopulation, poverty and desolation, almost apocalyptic science-fiction: can we imagine grazing sheep on Times Square, Trafalgar Square or Potsdamer Platz?

When the reigns of the Ostrogoths and Byzantines had come to an end and the Pope was the last remaining important power-figure, a new political structure was established. A new economy arose and the local road system remained in use. Even the maintenance of a shrunken economy requires an infrastructure. Roman roads are no longer roads built by Romans, but roads leading to and from Rome.

From p. 43 onwards, the survival or demise of certain roads is discussed. The famous Via Appia, still used in 536 by Belisarius for his campaign against the Ostrogoths and praised by Procopius, will quickly deteriorate after that time. Some road sections become inaccessible, and villages and settlements along the road are abandoned. The Via Flaminia and the Via Cassia, leading to the north, are still important until the end of the Middle Ages – especially for pilgrims –, but compared with the situation in the classical era, their functions are merely a shadow of what they used to be. The other Italian thoroughfares undergo roughly the same fate; other minor roads had already lost their function at an earlier stage.

The Via Amerina, a connecting road between the Via Cassia in the South and the Via Flaminia in the North, is an exception. All roads deteriorate – in physiognomic and economic respects, some slowly, others more quickly – but the Via Amerina, in the transitional period from Antiquity to the Dark Middle Ages becomes increasingly important. Over a relatively long period, it is the connection between two Byzantine areas: Rome and Ravenna, surrounded by the Langobardic Kingdom.

The views of the Italians concerning the original Roman road system are discussed by Esch from p. 58 onwards. According to the author, their awareness of the roads themselves – as well as of the buildings along them – disappears from the people's memory relatively quick-

ly. Milestones are thought to be boundary marks and the meanings of terms change. »Strata« becomes »road«, rather than »paved road«. Esch puts forward another example: a miniature in a ninth century manuscript (fig. 44, p. 59) shows the Via Appia, on one side flanked by so-called »centuriation« – a field, divided into square parcels or plots. Esch mentions that one was no longer aware that the road section of the Via Appia had been flanked by centuriation on both sides. This could be true, but the painter may also have suffered from lack of space, or may simply have preferred the green colour of mountains (or vegetation?)

The first part of the publication ends with a general picture of what ancient Roman roads look like today: that they are still visible and how they can be recognised in the landscape. Sometimes, they are completely intact and well-preserved; sometimes it is possible to discern traces of them, and sometimes, there is nothing visible any longer.

Just as in Esch's »Römische Straßen«, in this publication there is a large amount of illustrations, making this book very accessible to non-German speakers and non-professionals. Nevertheless, not all of the illustrations are distinct or give the right information. Illustration 7 (p. 13) shows a landscape; its sub-title mentions a Roman road, complete with various constructions. The illustration, however, only shows a wavy line (is this the Via Amerina?), and hardly any constructions can be seen. On the other hand, the sub-title of illustration 47 (p. 63) refers to a bridge (Ponte Sambuco), completely overgrown, almost invisible, so that a pedestrian does not realise that he is crossing a bridge. Nevertheless, the illustration shows a very clearly visible bridge. Or does the author suppose that the bridge is invisible when a pedestrian crosses the bridge over the top? In that case, a photo of the road surface of the bridge, as seen from the top, would be helpful.

Some illustrations have already been used in earlier publications. For example, from *Römische Straßen*: ill. 10, p. 17 (= ill. 17, p. 14 *Straßen*); ill. 20, p. 23 (= ill. 9, p. 65 *Straßen*); ill. 22, p. 27 (= ill. 17, p. 70 *Straßen*); ill. 23, p. 28 (= ill. 49, p. 88 *Straßen*). Other illustrations come from *Straßenzustand*: for example ill. 9, p. 16 (= ill. 4, p. 216 *Straßenzustand*) and ill. 28, p. 39 (= ill. 13, p. 232 *Straßenzustand*). This overlap only occurs in the first part. The annotations, however, differ.

On p. 10–15, Esch describes that the people living at the time of the Roman Empire of the West were not aware of its end approaching, but that the disappearance of certain functions, including road repairs, must have been noticeable. However, it was a slow process. On the one hand, after the reign of Theodosius I, no more milestones were erected; on the other hand, more than a century later, Theodoric and even Narses in the sixth century ordered the repair of some road sections. Unfortunately, an important passage concerning the decline of the Roman road system is not mentioned by Esch. In 417, seven years after the sack of Rome, in his work *De reditu suo* (On his way

home), Rutilius Namatianus explicitly describes that the surface of the roads has disappeared, being reduced to sandy tracks or dams (aggers): »Postquam Tuscus ager postquamque Aurelius agger | perpessus Geticas ense vel igne manus | non silvas domibus, non flumina ponte coercet« (Since Tuscany and since the Aurelian highway, after suffering the outrages of Goths with fire or sword, can no longer control forest with homestead or river with bridge). This passage is mentioned in my publication *Traffic and Congestion in the Roman Empire* (London and New York 2007) 177 endnote 74 (unfortunately missing in Esch's endnote 5 [p. 179], where he names certain publications concerning Roman road systems and constructions).

It is a pity that Esch does not discuss traffic flow. To what extent, after the change from a national road system into a regional one, did people make use of animals and wagons? How did the means of transport change when paved roads were reduced to sandy tracks, making travel more time-consuming along a longer, more winding road? What did this mean for pilgrims travelling on foot, by wagon or on horseback? What about toll points and safety along the roads?

The second part, »Die Via Amerina von der Via Cassia bis zum Tiber« describes the relatively unknown Via Amerina from Rome to Ameria in its modern form. Only the section from the starting point of the Via Amerina is actually discussed – the point where this road leaves the Via Cassia – to Orte, situated on the banks of the Tiber. In this part, many detailed survey-maps are added; they are crucial for a walking tour in this area – where, I assume, there are no signs.

Besides archaeological evidence, Esch also discusses passages of Roman literature and epigraphical sources where the Via Amerina is mentioned. According to these sources, the Via Amerina is one of the oldest Roman roads, dating from 241 B. C. onwards, but only named, according to written sources, in the second or third century A. D. Ameria, the name of the city from which the road takes its name, is known especially as the home of Sextus Roscius Amerinus, to whom Cicero dedicates his speech *Pro Sexto Roscio Amerino*. The distance between Rome and Ameria is – according to Cicero – fifty-six (Roman) miles (twenty-one miles along the Via Cassia and thirty-five along the Via Amerina; about eighty-three kilometres) and can be travelled by wagon in about ten hours. Unfortunately, Esch does not give clear information concerning walking distances in this book, although this information is crucial for a walker.

It is evident that the Via Amerina crosses a rugged, mountainous area. We see that the road first traverses a valley (an old volcano crater), then passes the village of Nepi (with a photo of the fine fortifications there), and further crosses a deep gorge. The road then continues to Falerii Novi and beyond, partly along older, pre-Roman roads, ending at the Tiber river bank.

There is a lot of information for the reader concerning the various modern physiognomies of the road. At

its starting-point, the Via Amerina is still intact (ill. 108, p. 113 and ill. 124, p. 124, sic), then partly intact (ill. 76), sometimes inaccessible forest (ill. 73, p. 87), a semi-paved road (ill. 77, p. 90), an unpaved road (ill. 97, p. 105) and completely disappeared (ill. 167, p. 161, map). Constructions are also discussed: illustration 85 (p. 94) shows a modern bridge built in ancient-Roman style.

Seven sections of the Via Amerina are described in detail; seventy-one marked points in these sections give even more information concerning landscape, physiognomy of the road, curiosities along the roadside (tombs, for example) and panoramic views. Without the large amount of photos and other illustrations, it would actually be impossible to read this second part. Nevertheless, some valuable remarks can be made.

At first, a map of the entire Via Amerina is lacking. Illustration 65 (p. 74) shows an overview of the seven survey-maps, but it is unclear in which part of Italy this area is exactly situated. Anyone who wants to know the situation of the Via Amerina is forced to take along a road map or an atlas. It would have been useful if a road map of the former Roman road system could have been added, including the Via Amerina, in a different colour; the routes of the majority of other Roman roads, mentioned by Esch – besides the Via Amerina, also the Via Appia, Via Aurelia, Via Cassia, Via Salaria and Via Flaminia – remain unknown to the reader. Readers are forced to acquire information from other publications on Roman roads – for example, the above mentioned *Traffic and Congestion in the Roman Empire* – or by means of an encyclopaedia, such as Wikipedia. Sometimes, for example on p. 73, Esch states that the Via Amerina is mentioned in the Peutinger Map, but an illustration of the Peutinger Map with the Via Amerina is absent. On the other hand, the above mentioned information – the Roman road system and the Peutinger Map, is presented in Esch's earlier publication *Römische Straßen*: p. 3 (the road system) and opposite to p. 1 (the Peutinger Map: Rome and its surroundings).

As mentioned above, the seven sections of the walking route of the Via Amerina are described in detail, but how can the walker find his way? Point 1 (Survey-map A, p. 80) mentions the junction of the Via Cassia and the Via Amerina. This junction is still completely intact, clearly shown in illustration 67 (p. 76). I assume that the photo was taken towards the north, with the Via Cassia turning left here and the Via Amerina turning right, but this is unclear. The survey-maps show neither the junction itself, nor other traces of the Via Amerina. Moreover, the survey-maps are sometimes cut off in an unfortunate manner: on survey-map G, neither the name of the village of Orte, the end of the route, is visible (p. 166), nor the name of Vasanello, the starting-point of the last section. From the name of the Tiber river only the last three letters »ERE« ([TEV]ERE) are visible.

In my opinion, the second part of the publication, the »walking guide«, would have gained in quality if

the route had been divided into shorter sections, easily approached, by means of a map, with the course of the Roman road clearly indicated, showing the well-preserved sections, the lesser preserved sections, and those which have completely disappeared (maybe by means of a dotted line), including a guide providing important information on, for example, pubs, restaurants and other facilities. In short, a fold-out map in full colour at the back of the book, not only indicating the course of the Via Amerina, as far as it is visible in the landscape, but also indicating modern roads, physiognomies of the various landscapes (fields, meadows, woods) in different colours and orientation points such as pylons, railways, churches, et cetera. This would enable the reader to choose the sections of the Via Amerina he wishes to follow. This map could easily be updated in the case of changes in the landscape like for example the erection of a new fence, the demolition of a church, a new road et cetera.

The first part is of particularly good quality. The reader acquires a lot of conveniently-arranged information about the transition from the ancient Roman road system to the Early Medieval one (of which Rome is still the centre). One can read this information in an armchair in one's living-room. The second part is – in my opinion – more suitable for reading in the field. In that case, the measurements of the publication should be smaller and equipped with more detailed survey-maps, easily to be carried in a backpack.

A suggestion for the publisher: why not publish a series of volumes on this walking route, together with the five other road sections as published in »Römische Straßen«, conveniently-sized, including practical information on accessibility, facilities, and indicating where the most well-preserved sections of roads are situated and, finally, translated into four or five languages? Of course, other roads outside Central Italy could also be added to the series. In short: this is a series of touristic walking routes through places of historical interest, containing added historical and archaeological information.

Leiden

Cornelis van Tilburg