

From Constantinople to Rome along the *via militaris*

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Narrative
Architecture
Archaeology
Landscape
Urban morphology



Divided land, divided sea

The Mediterranean that we are describing in the Medways research is divided in two parts by an ancient line. This line dates back to the time of Diocletian who introduced the tetrarchy dividing the Roman Empire into separate administrative domains, one in the East and one in the West. Perhaps this line has shifted today from its original position, but it is still there, and the ongoing war in Ukraine seems to be a consequence of that very same line. In order to reconnect these two divided parts of the Mediterranean, and of the surrounding landscapes, we would like to build a narrative related to the road that connected the two capitals of the Eastern and Western Roman Empire. We will poetically move, as in an imitation game, from Constantinople to Rome along the so-called *via militaris*. This route was actually a network of roads that connected the two capitals of the empire through the Balkans. The *via militaris* gradually replaced by importance the older *via Egnatia*, which connected Constantinople to Durrës, then across the Adriatic Sea to Brindisi, and finally to Rome along the Via Appia. After the tetrarchy, when the Empire moved its gravity centre towards the Balkan area, the *via militaris* became the main infrastructure of an itinerant principality. It is no coincidence that Constantine the Great was born in a city along this path, Naissus (Nis).

Fig. 1 | The *via Militaries*, the *via Ignacia*, both connecting Constantinople to Rome, and the line dividing the Roman Empire of East from the West.

Fig. 2 | Image from the movie *Gladiator* (2000), directed by Ridley Scott. In the scene Russell Crowe who impersonates Maximus Decimus Meridius, has the vision of returning home.

Fig. 3 | Present roads and ancient Roman roads in the Balkans (Holzner, 2014: 12).

Fig. 4 | Map of the northern Balkans in the 6th century AD, with the Roman provinces, major settlements and roads (Plakidas, 2010).



Imitation modes

Instead of writing a scientific paper about this road, we decided to tell a story, that of an imaginary honorary consul who after having served in the eastern provinces of the Empire, decided to return home to Rome. He left Constantinople riding on a horse, and travelled for over a month along this route, crossing the provinces of *Thracia*, *Moesia*, *Dacia*, *Pannonia* and *Dalmatia* all the way to the entry into Italy through the Julian Alps. From there he continued to Aquileia, Ravenna and then, after crossing the Apennines near *Balneum* (Bagno



di Romagna), he reached Rome riding along the Tiber valley. Aristotle in the Poetics recognized the imitation modes, as the distinctive character of all narrative styles, epic poetry, tragedy and comedy. I believe that the imitation modes may be taken as a descriptor of all arts, including therefore architecture. After examining alternative possibilities for the narrative form, i.e. epic poem (hexametric), *historia*, *epistula* and the *itinerarium*, I selected the *epistula*, hence it establishes a synchronic relationship between the narrator (the consul) and the narrated (the journey). The author of at the time of writing the letter has not completed his journey yet, but he is able to refer synchronically to the different parts of the trip, the present, the past and the future, providing in half a page of text, the complete image of the entire journey in its temporal disclosure.

Epistula, Decius ad Liciniam suam

Decius salutes his dear Licinia, if you are well I am well. I could finally buy a good horse at the *Forum Honorianum* in Sycas. It was a white horse, with long hair, and the price was good. The following day, I packed my few belongings and left the City heading north. I could cover almost seventy miles per day, stopping for the night in the Imperial *stationes* to get some food and wine, to wash myself and allow the horse, whom I named Bucephalus, like Alexander the great’s horse, to rest. I must say that the quality of the wine in these places is not so good, whereas the food is generally acceptable, and at times good. Along the road I could visit numerous cities, each one is crossed by the road on the inside, and within the walls beautiful monuments. Not counting the numerous smaller cities, I would like to mention *Hadrianopolis*, *Serdica*, *Naissus*, *Viminacium* and finally *Singidunum*, where I was able to buy a small gift for my beloved Licinia. Along the road I could meet some refugees, called Goths, they had to escape

Fig. 5 | The Roman network of roads of the Balkan area in the imperial period, I-IV cent. AD (Evangelidis, Tsompanas, Sirakoulis, Adamatzky, 2015: 2).

Fig. 6 | Trajan’s Gate, a fortified gate along the *via militaris*, at the mountain pass near Ihtiman, Bulgaria. (Popkonstantinov, 2017).

Fig. 7 | The *via militaris* near Castra rubra, close to today’s village Charmanli, Bulgaria (Garten, 2011).



from their lands which were recently invaded by the Huns, terrible barbarians coming from the east, who seem to have no law, no god and no piety. Some of these Goths are now heading to Rome with me, and I became friends with Thederic, who salutes you. I crossed the Julian Alps without encountering any snow, which was indeed the result of Minerva's protection. One part of the path after *Aquileia* was done on a ship sailing along the *Fossa Augusta*, where there were too many mosquitoes, you could almost not see the sun. I am now writing to you, after a one moon trip, from *Balneum*, where I stopped to bathe in the warm waters. The city is close to Rome, I should therefore be arriving in one week, so this letter might precede me only for a few days. Hoping to reach the rustic villa near *Trebula Suffenas* soon, and to have a banquet with you and all the friends, with good wine, not like the awful one they served me in *Ancialis*.

Vale
Decius Maximus Animus

Tables

Table I | The last stretch of the via militaris, with the indication of the stationes as reported on the Tabula Peutingeriana, distance in miles and kilometres, and the corresponding modern place names.

Placename	Distance/ miles	Distance/ km	Modern city/Country
Ancialis	XVIII	26.64	Pomorie Bulgaria
Apollonia	XI	16.28	Sozopol Bulgaria
Thera	X	14.80	Primorsko Bulgaria
Buatico	XII	17.76	Tsarevo Bulgaria
Scyllam	XII	17.76	Athopol Bulgaria
Philias	XX	29.60	Begendik Turkey
Thymea	XII	17.76	Belgrad, Bahceköy Turkey
Sycas			Karaköy Turkey

Fig. 8 | Tabula Peutingeriana, Codex Vindobonensis 324, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Wien, original III-IV century, XII century copy.

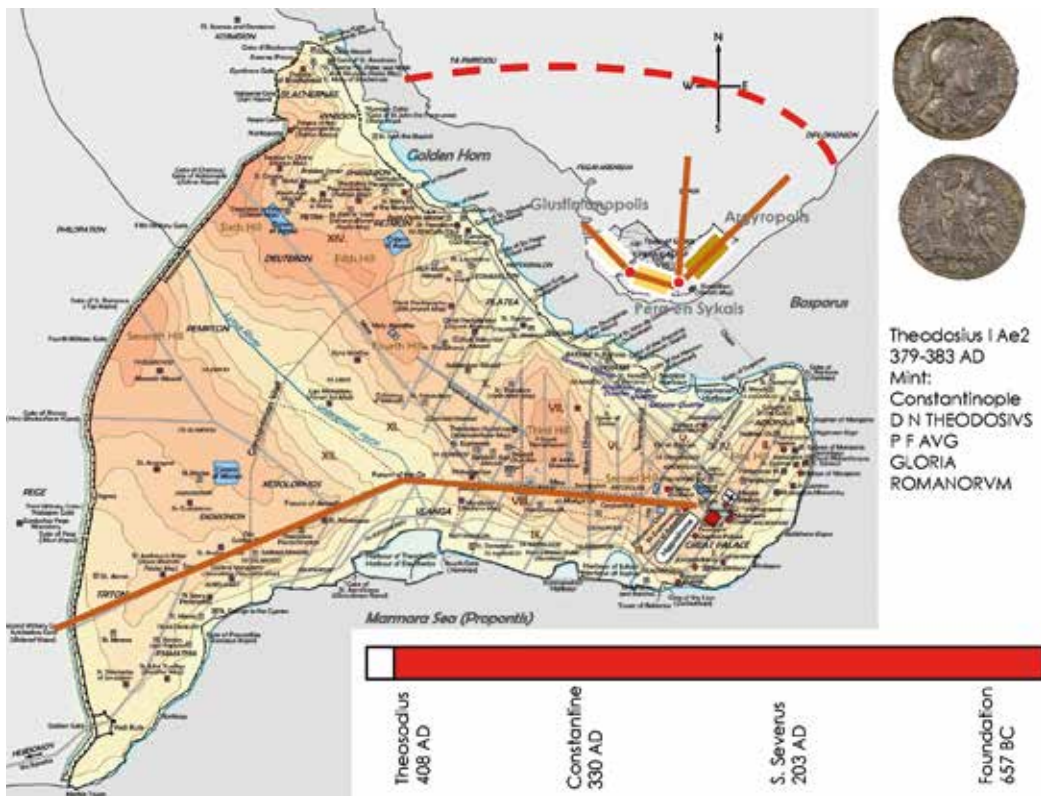
Fig. 9 | Tabula Peutingeriana, Codex Vindobonensis 324, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Wien, original III-IV century, XII century copy.



Table II | Main Roman urban settlements along the via militaris, and corresponding modern cities between Serbia and Turkey.

Roman city	Modern city	Country
Singidunum	Belgrade	Serbia
Gratiana	Dobra	Serbia
Viminacium	Kostolac	Serbia
Naissus	Niš	Serbia
Remesiana	Bela Palanka	Serbia
Serdica	Sofia	Bulgaria
Philippopolis	Plovdiv	Bulgaria
Hadrianopolis	Edirne	Turkey
Arcadiopolis	Lüleburgaz	Turkey
Constantinopolis	Istanbul	Turkey

Fig. 10 | Growth phases of Constantinople along the Via Egnatia, and of the XIII region along the via militaris (Author's elaboration).



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Med Ways

Open Atlas

Contents



8

The MedWays Open Atlas

Mosè Ricci

Water



29

City networks. Geometries of development

Alberto Clementi, Ester Zazzero

35

Constructing Mediterranean Trajectories

Elena Longhin

45

East Med Landscapes

Francesco Alberti

57

EChOWAYS

Maddalena Ferretti, Antonio Barone, Sara Ferrar, Elisabetta Baldassari, Gianluigi Mondaini

71

Giulianathewhale

Silvana Kühtz, Ina Macaione, Silvia Parentini, Chiara Rizzi

83

Internet of Ecologies

Mathilde Marengo, Iacopo Neri, Chiara Farinea

93

Mediterranean. Waterpower Amalfi Coast

Luigi Centola

99

Mediterranean

Vito Cappiello

107

The Mediterranean ways of marine biodiversity

Stefano Acunto

119

Mediterrānĕa Thermae

Sara Favargiotti, Margherita Pasquali, Chiara Chioni

129

Mediterranea

Viviana Panaccia, Mauro Canali

137

Med MPAs in the net

Romina D'Ascanio, Stefano Magaudda, Serena Muccitelli, Anna Laura Palazzo

147

Only by water

Paola Cannavò, Pierfrancesco Celani, Donatella Cristiano, Antonella Pelaggi, Massimo Zupi

159

Reviving Barada`s River in Damascus city

Ghada Bilal

165

A section of the landscapes of the Mediterranean along the route of a thread of water

Carles Llop, Josep Maldonado, Gemma Milà, Ramón Sisó, Artur Tudela

Land



183

Allegories of the Downshifting

Fabrizia Berlingieri, Lucia La Giusa

195

The breath of the city

Pepe Barbieri, Angela Fiorelli, Alessandro Lanzetta

207

Build on the margin

Alessio Battistella

219

Catalunya – Land Grid(S)

Manuel Gausa

239

Finding Romulea

Adelina Picone, Giovanni Luigi Panzetta, Maria Barrasso, Marina Giangrieco, Andrea Lo Conte, Antonio Sena

251

Focus on Disaster

Francesco Gangemi, Rossana Torlontano, Valentina Valerio

265

Food Street

Gianluca Burgio, Antonio Cal Marco Graziano, Deborah Giunta, Paolo Rosario Pagano, Pere Fuertes Pérez

275

The Mediterranean *invented*

Antonio Pizza, Arianna Iampieri

287

Mediterranean Sections

Alessia Allegri, Caterina Anastasia

299

Mediterranean walls

Maria Gelvi

311

Three miradores

Cherubino Gambardella

319

The Trasversale Sicula

Renzo Lecardane

Coast



333

Adriatic Inner Sea

Chiara Ravagnan, Domenico D'Uva, Chiara Amato, Giulia Bevilacqua, Ozgun Gunaydin

347

'Along the line' between Noto and Pachino

Gero Marzullo

359

Beyond the Port City

Beatrice Moretti

373

Condomini overlooking the Gulf

Chiara Ingrosso

385

Corinth Project

Lucio Zazzara

397

The design of the pergolas of the Gulf of Naples

Simona Ottieri

407

Mare Monstrum: a land between the seas

Consuelo Nava, Irene Curulli, Giuseppe Mangano, Alessia Leuzzo, Domenico Lucanto, Alessia Rita Palermiti

421

SubLimen landscapes

Carmen Mariano, Marsia Marino

429

Transitional Memories

Emanuele Sommariva, Nicola Valentino Canessa

441

Upstate Rome

Lina Malfona, Monica Manicone, Andrea Crudeli

Route



455

Balkan Narratives

Lorenzo Pignatti, Federico di Lallo, Claudia Di Girolamo, Stefania Gruosso, Andrea Di Cinzio, Maria Catamo, Lorenzo Morelli, Ilde Manuela Paulucci

467

Circular Territories

Jörg Schröder, Riccarda Cappeller, Alissa Diesch, Federica Scaffidi

479

Crossing Borders

Marco Scarpinato, Fanny
Bouquerel, Lucia Pierro

493

Cultural routes and trails

Massimo Crotti, Paolo Mellano

501

A first report

Gentucca Canella, Paolo Mellano

513

**From Constantinople to
Rome along the via
militaris**

Alessandro Camiz

519

Invisible Routes

Margherita Pasquali

533

Itineraries in landscape

Massimo Angrilli, Valentina
Ciuffreda

543

**Landscapes of
(im)mobilities**

Alessandro Raffa

555

MED@Tunnel

Maria Maccarrone,
Francesco Finocchiaro

571

**The MedWay of
the Due Principati**

Felice De Silva, Pasquale
Persico, Roberto Vanacore

581

**Migration in the
Mediterranean**

Anna-Maria Lioga

593

The Paths of Magic

Simonetta Bassi

611

**The ports of the
Mediterranean**

Rosario Pavia

619

The Silk Road 5.0

Francesca Moraci, Maurizio
Francesco Errigo, Dora
Bellamacina, Celestina Fazia

629

**Synchronic nodes and
Mediterranean thought**

Giorgia De Pasquale

639

The VENTO Cyclerooute

Rossella Moscarelli, Paolo Pileri

651

Vitruvio return to Rome

Valentina Radi

665

The way of flowers

Giorgia Tucci

673

Uniform Circular Motion

Raffaele Cutillo, Egidio Cutillo,
Giovanni Izzo

Legacy



681

**Accessibility and
storytelling**

Bruna Di Palma, Lucia Alberti

693

AFAL, a meridian story

Elisabetta De Lucia

703

**The archaeological
MedWay of the Gulf
of Naples**

Manuela Antoniciello,
Felice De Silva

715

Beyond the borders

Pino Scaglione, Rosanna Algieri,
Isabella Capalbo, Yuan Wang

725

**Complex representation
and integrated risks
management**

Carmine Gambardella, Rosaria
Parente, Alessandro Ciabrone

749

Historic paths of Abruzzo

Caterina Palestini, Alessandro
Basso, Francesca Marzetti

761

Houses made of Sun

Concetta Tavoletta

779

**How cultures of the
Mediterranean persist**

Kay Bea Jones

793

**Lustre ceramics in the
Mediterranean basin**

Brunetto Giovanni Brunetti,
Claudio Seccaroni, Antonio
Sgamellotti

811

**Malaga through the eyes of
the barrio of El Molinillo**

Alona Martinez Perez

819

Mediterranean Ways

Fabrizia Ippolito, Ilenia
Mariarosaria Esposito

833

**Postcards from the
underworld**

Caterina Padoa Schioppa

839

**Taranto, a female
enterprise path
from the sea**

Daniela Cavallo

847

Tessere

Arianna Papale

857

Via Egnatia

Florian Nepravishhta, Xhejsi
Baruti, Benida Kraja, Fiona
Nepravishhta

871

"U IARDINU"

Alberto Tempì, Elena Barthel

Island



879

Αιγαῖον πέλαγος

Silvia Mannocci

887

About the Perfect City

Francesca Rossi

897

**Aegean emotional
landscapes**

Lucia Alberti, Bruna Di Palma

909

Favignana Quarry Island

Giuseppe Marsala, Pasquale Mei

921

Inhabiting the Apocalypse

Alessandro Franchetti Pardo

937

**Ischia and the Path of
Consumer Tourism**

Gioconda Cafiero, Viviana Saitto

951

**Lampedusa: the central
Mediterranean route of
migration**

MariaLuisa Palumbo

957

**Seven Mediterranean
Islands**

Pablo Pérez-Ramos, Duarte
Santo, Stefania Staniscia

967

**Shallow Waters -
Hidden land**

Eli Janja Stojanović

975

A stone house in Malta

Mario Pisani

981

**Temple of Biodiversity
of Skadar Lake**

Ajša Đukić

989

T(h)RACE

Irene Poli

999

Venice Sylva

Sara Marini

This book is an open and potentially infinite interdisciplinary atlas of Mediterranean Routes: systems of material or immaterial relationships that somehow leave a trace in the landscape. The Open Atlas aims to put them under observation through different narrative devices that can be true, false or verisimilar, in any case capable of exploring the meaning, nature and myths of the Mediterranean.

MedWays Open Atlas collects research materials developed by different authors for the Moses Ricci's "Le Vie del Mediterraneo" project for the Beniamino Segre Interdisciplinary Linceo Center of the Accademia dei Lincei, the Italian National Academy of Sciences.



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9

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