



The 'via Appia'(Appia Way): A 2300-year-old Roman Road

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YOUNG engineers have always asked what should the design life of an engineering project be like? What if I tell you that it can be 2000+ years? Last year, while having a well deserved break in Italy, my wife and I took a walking tour along what is considered the oldest Roman Empire 'highway'.

I found it interesting enough to share with fellow engineers firstly because as a highway engineer, I have often wondered how long our hard work will continue to be used. Secondly, it is amazing how this road, an engineering project, played a major part in shaping the history of the Roman empire.

This road links Rome to the southern part of Italy and is the first major long Roman road. The engineering technology of Roman roads was quite sound, and many principles are still used today. Excavation was done to hard ground, and layers were laid until the top layer was tamped down with stones shaped appropriately.

Lime cement was a technology rediscovered by the Romans and placed between the stones. The roads were crowned for drainage like today's roads. There are some sections of the via Appia where the stones are supposedly the original stones of those days, and there are claims that the tracks of carriages can be seen on it. Certainly, the section of the road we walked on looked very authentic.

Rest areas were set up along the road, fountains were built to provide drinking water for man and beast. Towns developed from the rest areas where travellers camped overnight.

The significance of the road to the Romans is more remarkable than the engineering of it. As this was one of the first roads built during the early days of the empire, it helped to resolve the many years of war and uneasy peace with the southern tribes. Roman troops and supplies were easily and quickly sent to war when required, thus forging control over the south.

Noblemen and rich Romans liked to live along this road. People liked to have places of worship here, and chose to be buried along this road. Thus churches, burial grounds (e.g. catacombs - underground burial sites where crypts and bones still exist) and noble houses have been preserved until today.

Both the abutting properties and the road have historical significance and have been preserved. Another notable



event is that Spartacus and his defeated army of slaves were crucified along this road.

Today, the via Appia is bypassed by modern highways and serves mainly as a tourist and historical site. This road, and Roman roads in general, certainly served its role for a long period of time, shaping the social, economical and political aspects of the population for 2300 years. ■