

Appius Claudius Caecus ‘The Blind’

Faber est quisquis suae fortunae (‘Every man is architect of his own fortune’)

Appius Claudius Caecus came from the Claudian *gens*, a prime patrician family that could trace its ancestors as far back as the *decemvirs* who authored Rome’s first laws (the Twelve Tables) in the mid-fifth century BC. Although many Roman families could boast successful ancestors, Appius Claudius Caecus has the distinction of being one of the first characters in Roman history for whom a substantial array of material evidence survives: a road, an aqueduct, a temple and at least one inscription. His character and his nickname Caecus, ‘The Blind’, are also explained in historical sources. Livy (*History of Rome* 9.29) claims he was struck down by the gods for giving responsibilities of worship to temple servants, rather than the traditional family members, at the Temple of Hercules. Perhaps a more credible explanation is offered by Diodorus Siculus (20.36), who suggests that Appius Claudius said he was blind and stayed at home to avoid reprisals from the Senate after his time in office. In that case, his name was clearly coined in jest, as is often the case with cognomen.

Appius Claudius Caecus, whether or not he was actually blind, is an illuminating case study in the ways that varying types of evidence (literature, inscriptions and archaeology) can be used together to recreate history. His succession of offices, not quite the typical progression of the *cursus honorum*, records a man who enjoyed the epitome of a successful career in Roman politics (Slide 1). This case study will examine a few of these materials to see how a single man could shape the social, political and urban policies of Rome.

A milestone in Roman politics (CIL 11.1827)

An inscription, called an *elogium*, found in Arretium (Arezzo) records honours for Appius Claudius Caecus. However, it is clearly not the original inscription (Slide 2). How do we know this? The letter forms in Caecus’ inscriptions are of varying sizes (the top row with his name are much larger) and the spellings are from the imperial period (and we know that Augustus restored the *Via Appia*) (Slide 3). The polished stone is also of a quality that was unusual in the fourth century BC. Comparing it with a similar type of inscription from Polla (CIL 1.638) in the mid-second century BC (150 years later), one can see different spellings, different letter forms, and even the layout offers less clarity in terms of presentation (no margins and odd spaces in the text) (Slide 4). What is interesting is that this text, which records the building of a road from Capua to Rhegio, may have honoured one of Caecus’ descendants (Appius Claudius Pulcher) in what was both an honorary text and a milestone (perhaps serving the same function as Caecus’ dedication). Appius Claudius Caecus’ text was clearly restored (and probably translated from fourth-century Latin spellings and letter forms) and probably served as an inspiration to his descendants: Appius Claudius Pulcher and Augustus, his future (many greats-)grandson-in-law.

‘Appius Claudius, son of Caius, Caecus, censor, consul twice, dictator, interrex three times, praetor twice, curule aedile twice, quaestor, tribune of the soldiers three times. He captured several towns from the Samnites, routed an army of Sabines and

Etruscans. He prevented peace being made with King Pyrrhus. In his censorship he paved the Appian Way and built an aqueduct for Rome. He built the Temple of Bellona.’

(CIL 11.1827)

While this text itself may seem mundane, it corroborates historic accounts as well as linking Appius Claudius Caecus’ political and military careers. The text also demonstrates how all these factors came together: it was the money from the successful military campaigns that allowed him to fund the projects he carried out as censor (Slide 4). It is also worth noting the order in which items are listed. His civic offices come first, in descending order, followed by his military conquests, followed finally by his public works. For the emperor Augustus, who was composing his own *res gestae*, the achievements of Appius Claudius Caecus as an official (who seemed to have held every possible office), a military hero, a negotiator and the initiator of a number of public works, were an inspiration and also an important precedent of a powerful leader in the republic.

The Via Appia

‘The Appian Way is the Queen of long roads.’

(Statius, *Silvae* 2.2)

The Appian Way was originally built to Capua and then extended all the way to the eastern coastal town of Brindisium (Slide 5). The road was built primarily for military reasons: the Pontine marshes were rife with malaria and after Rome suffered an embarrassing defeat in the Battle of Caudine Forks (321 BC), where soldiers were trapped and sent back under the yoke (Livy, *History of Rome* 9.6), the safe transport of soldiers and their supplies became a pressing issue. The road would also prove vital in establishing colonies, as a means of keeping the army busy, creating jobs, and laying down a path for social, economic, administrative and military interaction. The *Via Appia* paved the way for successful campaigns against Etruria and the Samnites, which are recorded on Appius Claudius Caecus’ inscription.

The road itself required quite a bit of engineering, as it cut straight through the Alban Hills using causeways and bridges, which, like their modern counterparts, were in constant need of repair. This was an expensive endeavour but also one that kept a number of workers in employment.

The road began at the Forum Romanum, then went over the Servian Wall at the Porta Capena and through the wealthy suburbs along the length of an old gravel road (the *Via Norba*). It was at one time packed with funerary monuments (Slide 6). The *Via Appia* employed a level of small stones, covered in lime cement (made from volcanic pumice and tufa, which were quarried near by, perhaps not far from the sites of later Christian and Jewish catacombs). The top layer was covered in large stones so smoothly that the joins were apparently invisible, and drainage ditches were added at the sides of the road. Today, much of the cement has worn away and the joins are both visible and palpable (Slide 7).

Part of the *Via Appia Antica* has now been turned into an archaeological park, where one can walk or rent a bike (the latter may be better, as remains are dispersed over

miles and the paving is quite uneven). Many of the remaining monuments have been restored, although some, like the tomb of Caecillia Metalla (now a museum with a small collection of monuments), are in better shape than others. The area has an abundance of remains – the Villa of Maxentius, a number of catacombs (San Sebastiano, San Callisto, Domitilla) – as well as several small museums (such as the Capo di Bove). The tradition of writing continues on the *Via Appia*, where some ancient monuments bear modern graffiti, including the assertion ‘lying wanker’ in Italian. Claridge’s *Archaeological Guide* offers a generally fair, if somewhat romantic, assessment of the site (for instance, some of the ‘monuments’ she identifies are little more than nondescript piles of bricks). Overall, though, it is well worth a visit, and it certainly provides a peaceful contrast to the crowded streets of Rome.

The Aqua Appia (312 BC)

‘In the first place he built the Appian Aqueduct, as it is called, from a distance of eighty stades to Rome, and spent a large sum of public money for this construction without a decree of the Senate. Next he paved with solid stone the greater part of the Appian Way, which was named for him, from Rome to Capua, the distance being more than a thousand stades. And since he dug through elevated places and levelled with noteworthy fills the ravines and valleys, he expended the entire revenue of the state but left behind a deathless monument to himself, having been ambitious in the public interest.’

(Diodorus Siculus 20.36)

The *Aqua Appia* was the first aqueduct to be built in Rome, indicating both the security of Rome’s expanding empire and the increasing needs of her urban population. It ran for a distance of 16.4 kilometres and ended at the Forum Boarium (Slide 8, no. 2a). Like many subsequent aqueducts, much of the *Aqua Appia* ran underground, offering some protection from troublesome Samnites. According to Frontinus’ quintessential work *On Aqueducts*, it supplied 75,537 cubic metres of water a day. It ran along the Servian Wall and past the Caelian Hill (Slide 9). We know it continued to work for over 400 years: it was restored in the second century BC, then again by Augustus, and it was still functioning when Frontinus wrote his treatise towards the end of the first century AD.

Aqueducts were incredibly expensive both to build and to maintain; they were made possible primarily by the funds from war spoils. So there is a clear connection between Appius’ role as censor (the first office listed on the third line of the inscription) and the accounts of his successful military actions (recorded on lines 5–7). Indeed, these two factors directly result in the last section of the text: the public works he undertook in his role as censor. Even though these were funded by the state, both the road and the aqueduct were given the name Appia. The distinction between who commissioned a work and who paid for it can be deliberately vague, so it is worth considering the question. Ascribing his names to these works was yet another boon for the office of the censor; and one must also factor in the practical powers of an individual to commission massive projects in Rome, which employed thousands of workers and provided a number of lucrative building contracts. This is certainly one reason why the office of censor was so coveted and why its tenure was five years: Rome wasn’t built in a day.

Web resources

For more on Appius Claudius Caecus and thoughts on orthography, see
'Appius Claudius Caecus and thoughts on the letter "Z":

http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/miscellanea/zed.html

Text and translation of *CIL* 11.1827 can be found at the Attalos site under the label
'Elogia': <http://attalus.org/docs/cil/elogia.html>

Aqua Appia entry in Platner and Ashby:

http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/Places/Europe/Italy/Lazio/Roma/Rome/Texts/PLATOP*/Aqua_Appia.html

Bibliography

A. Claridge, *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide*, Oxford University Press, 2010.