CHAPTER TWO

The Long Descent

An aqueduct is an argument about time, made in stone. It asks a city to believe in a century it will not live to see.

VITRUVIUS, PARAPHRASED

WATER DOES NOT WANT TO TRAVEL. LEFT ALONE IT SETTLES, SEEPS AND EVAPORATES, AND the whole history of the aqueduct is the history of people refusing to accept that. To move water any distance at all you must first persuade it downhill, and then keep persuading it, metre after metre, for as long as the journey lasts. The Roman surveyors who set out from the springs above Subiaco in the winter of 144 BCE understood this better than anyone before them. They were not building a wall or a road. They were building a fall.

THE GRADIENT PROBLEM

The difficulty is easy to state and almost impossible to solve by intuition. A channel that drops too steeply will scour its own floor, tearing the lining away and turning a clean supply into a slurry of grit and mortar within a decade. A channel that drops too gently will silt, then stagnate, then stop. Somewhere between those two failures lies a gradient — for the Aqua Marcia, roughly a quarter of a metre for every kilometre travelled — that keeps water moving fast enough to stay clean and slow enough to leave its bed intact.

Finding that gradient across ninety-one kilometres of broken country, with no instrument more sophisticated than a water level on a wooden frame, required a discipline that modern engineers still find startling. The *chorobates* was a plank some six feet long with a shallow groove cut along its upper face. Fill the groove, wait for the surface to settle, and you have a horizontal reference accurate to a few millimetres. Sight along it, mark a staff at a known distance, and you have measured a fall. Repeat this perhaps forty thousand times, in sequence, without ever accumulating an error you cannot correct, and you have an aqueduct.[1]

What is remarkable is not that the Romans could do it once, but that they could do it repeatedly, across two centuries and three continents, to a tolerance that survives in the ruins. Where the channels can still be traced — at Nîmes, at Segovia, in the hills above Carthage — the measured gradients cluster tightly around the values the texts recommend. This was not inspired guesswork. It was a profession, with standards, apprenticeships and a vocabulary of failure.

> *"The surveyors were not building a wall or a road. They were building a fall — and a fall, unlike a wall, cannot be corrected once the water is in it."*
>
> ON THE AQUA MARCIA

The vocabulary of failure matters here. Roman engineering literature is unusually candid about what goes wrong: the collapsed arcade, the spring that failed in the third dry summer, the siphon whose lead pipes burst under a head nobody had thought to calculate. Frontinus, appointed *curator aquarum* in 97 CE, opens his survey of the city's supply with an inventory of leaks, thefts and illegal taps, and returns to them with the grim persistence of a man who has learned that infrastructure is mostly maintenance.

CROSSING THE VALLEYS

For most of its length an aqueduct is invisible. The popular image — tiers of arches marching across a plain — describes perhaps a twentieth of any given system. The rest runs underground, in a covered channel a metre or so wide, punctuated every seventy paces by an inspection shaft. Burying the line was cheaper, protected the water from sun and contamination, and kept the structure out of reach of armies. Arcades were what you built when the ground betrayed you.

And the ground betrayed you at every valley. Here the engineer faced a genuine choice. He could carry the channel across on arches, holding the gradient in the air at enormous cost in stone and labour. He could follow the contour around the valley head, adding kilometres to the route and consuming precious fall in the detour. Or he could commit to an inverted siphon: drop the water into a sealed pressure conduit, let it run down one slope, across the floor and up the other side, trusting the physics to lift it back to within a few metres of where it started.

The siphon was the boldest of the three and the least loved. Lead pipe was expensive and the pressures at the valley floor were vicious — at Lyon, on the Gier line, the head approached nine atmospheres, enough to split a poorly cast joint and empty the system into a farmer's field. Yet the Gier siphons worked, some of them for three hundred years, which suggests that the casting was not poor and that somebody, somewhere, had worked out what wall thickness the pressure demanded.[2]

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It is tempting to read all of this as a story about technology, and it is not. The Aqua Marcia cost the treasury one hundred and eighty million sesterces, a sum that would have paid a legion for a decade. It was funded by the spoils of Corinth and Carthage and approved by a Senate that had to be persuaded, against the objections of a rival faction and an inconvenient prophecy from the Sibylline Books, that the city's water was worth more than the city's ships.

That argument — infrastructure against armament, the century against the year — is the oldest one in public works, and the Roman version of it is unusually well documented. What the record shows is that the argument was won not by engineers but by magistrates, and won on the same grounds every time: that a city which must carry its water cannot grow, and a city which cannot grow will be governed by whoever does.

NOTES

1. The forty-thousand figure assumes sightings at roughly two-metre intervals over the surveyed length; Ashby's reconstruction of the Marcia's route suggests the true number was higher on the mountain sections and considerably lower across the Campagna.
2. Estimates of the Gier head vary between 8.2 and 9.4 atmospheres depending on which reconstruction of the valley floor is accepted. The surviving pipe fragments are consistent with the upper figure.

PART ONE — STONE AND GRADIENT

CHAPTER THREE

What the City Drank

Compare, if you will, the idle Pyramids, or the useless though renowned works of the Greeks, with these indispensable structures.

FRONTINUS, DE AQUAEDUCTU, I.16

BY THE END OF THE FIRST CENTURY THE CITY OF ROME RECEIVED SOMETHING ON THE ORDER OF a million cubic metres of water a day, delivered by eleven separate lines and distributed through a hierarchy of tanks, pipes and public basins that Frontinus catalogued with the exasperated precision of an auditor. Almost none of it went to private houses. The overwhelming majority ran, day and night, into fountains that never closed and baths that charged a quarter of an as.

THE ECONOMICS OF THE OPEN TAP

A modern water utility meters supply and prices scarcity. Rome did neither. The public fountains ran continuously because there was no practical way to stop them: the channels arrived at a fixed rate and the surplus had to go somewhere. What looks like extravagance was in part an engineering necessity, and the overflow was put to work — flushing the sewers, cooling the streets, filling the ornamental basins that made the city bearable in August.

Private connections existed but were rationed by a licence system that Frontinus found riddled with fraud. A grant specified a *calix*, a standardised bronze nozzle of fixed bore, fitted at the point of connection. Water taken through a legal calix was in proportion to its cross-section; water taken through a calix that had been quietly reamed out, or fitted lower down the tank where the head was greater, was not. Frontinus discovered pipes serving properties whose owners had died a generation earlier, and a lively trade in connections that appeared on no register at all.

The remedy was bureaucratic rather than technical. Stamp the calices, register the stamps, inspect the joints, and prosecute the *aquarii* — the water gangs — who had been selling capacity on the side. It is the least romantic chapter in the history of Roman water and by some distance the most modern.

> *"What looks like extravagance was in part an engineering necessity. The water arrived whether the city wanted it or not; the only question was where the surplus went."*
>
> ON THE PUBLIC FOUNTAINS

The system's real vulnerability was never the arcade or the siphon. It was the settling tank, the *castellum*, where sediment dropped out and the flow divided between competing users. Clean a castellum badly and a district's supply turns brown for a week. Divide it dishonestly and a district loses its supply altogether — quietly, without a single stone falling.

THE LONG MAINTENANCE

Every aqueduct in the ancient world eventually failed, and almost none of them failed dramatically. They failed by accretion. Calcium carbonate precipitated out of the hard limestone water and built up on the channel walls in laminated sheets — *sinter* — at a rate of a millimetre or two a year. Left unchecked, sinter narrows a channel by half in two centuries and chokes it entirely in three.

Removing it meant sending crews into the covered conduit with hammers and chisels, working by lamplight in a space too low to stand in, while the water was diverted or the supply simply shut down. The inspection shafts every seventy paces were there for exactly this. So were the standing maintenance gangs — several hundred men, on the public payroll, whose whole professional life was the slow removal of stone from stone.

When the western administration lost the capacity to fund those gangs, the aqueducts did not collapse. They silted. The arcades outside Rome stood for another thousand years, admired by travellers who assumed the ruins had been destroyed by war. They had been destroyed by nobody at all — by the simple withdrawal of attention, which is how most infrastructure ends.

NOTES

1. Frontinus gives twenty-five standard calix sizes; surviving examples from Pompeii match the published bores to within two millimetres.
2. Sinter deposition rates vary widely with water chemistry. The Eifel aqueduct serving Cologne accumulated over twenty centimetres in roughly one hundred and eighty years of operation.

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