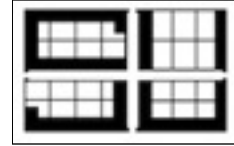


ROMA PONTIFICATA



INTRODUCTION

ANCIENT Rome was well served by bridges across the Tiber from the period of the late Republic on. However from the earliest period of the Kings (753-509 BC) to the early Republic, Rome seems to have had only one bridge, the Pons Sublicius, attributed to the legendary second king of the city, Numa Pompilius. Tradition has given Numa the character of initiator of religious rituals and of the priestly office of *Pontifex*. The title *Pontifex* or bridge-builder, whether of spiritual or physical bridges, has often been referred to as “maker of roads and bridges” [Lanciani, *New Tales of old Rome*, 1901, p. 54]. The combination of the religious and the practical in that priestly office is readily understandable, since the decision of whether and where to build a bridge across the river, which would make the early city vulnerable to attack from the north, was so important that divine inspiration was needed.

While we have to rely on ancient historians and their compilation of early history and legend for what we have mentioned so far, we don't need to do so exclusively for the choice of location of some of the ancient bridges. For that we can utilize the system of prehistoric pathways which were in place long before the founding of the city. If we accept the notion of the *persistence of tracks and paths*, that these primitive ways tended to stay precisely where they were and became the principal streets of the early city, then by analyzing the layout of these streets we can deduce some of the rationale for the placement of the bridges. Convergence of these paths at points on the banks of the Tiber suggest primitive fords or river crossings at those locations, subsequently improved by the building of bridges. Such pathway convergences occur for three of the bridges treated here, Pons Aemilius (Ponte Rotto), Pons Triumphalis, and Pons Milvius.

Reasons for the location of other bridges are site-specific. Thus the choice of location for the island bridges is obvious, and the Pons Aelius (Ponte S. Angelo) was apparently placed in direct relationship with the Mausoleum of Hadrian. More difficult to explain are the locations of Pons Aurelius (Ponte Sisto), and the vanished Pons Probi and Pons Agrippae. While the latter three bridges are shown by Lanciani to be connected to ancient streets, some of those streets do not appear to number among the prehistoric paths mentioned above, but were what may be termed as “growth streets,” built as the city expanded. Possibly the streets and bridges were planned together in these three cases. Indeed all three were built or restored at the time of city-wide public projects under Augustus, Antoninus Pius, Symmachus, and Theodosius.

Geographers sometimes refer to the Tiber as a torrent rather than a river because of the wild fluctuations of its level, reaching differentials as high as 19 meters. Periodic floods have devastated large portions of the city from antiquity to the 20th century. The worst of these floods affected the bridges under consideration in this exhibit, sometimes sweeping them away altogether. Ancient historians report severe floods with

consequential damage to various bridges. Restoration and sometimes total rebuilding of the damaged bridges continued until the end of the empire, but medieval neglect caused the disappearance of half the bridges under discussion. Medieval popes, despite having appropriated the ancient title of *Pontifex Maximus*, were in too weak a position to tend the city's bridges. Renaissance popes, having become the true rulers of the city, were more successful in this respect. Thus Ponte Sisto was built on the piers of the ancient Pons Aurelius, and the Pons Aemilius was restored after the flood of 1557, though not for long. However a new bridge planned by Julius II at the northern end of Via Giulia, connecting that new street to Borgo, did not get built until the mid 20th century.

The net result is that whereas in ancient Rome there were seven points in the city where the river could be crossed on bridges, during the middle ages there were only three: next to the Castel S. Angelo (Aelius), at the island (Fabricius/Cestius) and just downstream from the island (Aemilius). For a century in the Renaissance there were four crossing points after 1474 when Sixtus IV built Ponte Sisto on the piers of the ancient Pons Aurelius, upstream of the island, but this was offset by the failure of the Pons Aemilius at the end of the Cinquecento. Thus until the mid-Ottocento there remained only three crossing points on the river. By comparison, today there are thirteen bridges in the historic part of the city within the walls.

The emphasis of this exhibit is on the display of prints and photographs relating to the surviving ancient bridges, most of which have undergone considerable change since the Renaissance. Included in the original prints are the two unusual Chiesa & Gambarini prints of the Tiber river, and four relatively rare ones of bridges by Luigi Rossini. The construction of the river walls in the late 19th and early 20th century is responsible for much of this change, sparing only Ponte Milvio and Ponte Fabricio. Images revealing these transformations should help the viewer grasp the impact of that extensive project on the ancient bridges and on the change of appearance in the river itself. Lanciani claimed that the ancients had a better way of controlling the river flow than trapping it between two high walls. Garibaldi's proposal for an overflow channel passing around Rome to the east would also have been a better solution than what amount to six-kilometer long dams on either side of the river, but this idea was disregarded by the new government after Rome became the national capital in 1870. Once very much part of the city with streets leading down to its very edge, and the site of considerable activity, the Tiber is now excised from the urban network of streets and no longer plays the active part in the life of the city that it once did.