Appius Claudius Caecus

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The Case for Examination

Every visitor who has driven southeast out of Rome on the modern Appia Nuova, or walked the ancient basalt blocks of the Appian Way between Porta San Sebastiano and the tomb of Cecilia Metella, has been in contact with a decision made in 312 BC. The road that Appius Claudius Caecus ordered built during his censorship became the military spine of Roman Italy and eventually the artery of an empire. Horace traveled it. Cicero owned a villa near it. Paul of Tarsus walked its final miles into Rome as a prisoner. Spartacus's crucified followers were displayed along it as a warning. Its original destination was Capua, approximately 132 Roman miles from the Porta Capena; its later extensions reached Beneventum, Tarentum, and Brindisi at the heel of Italy. For two millennia after it was built, it

was the longest road in the world that could be traveled without leaving a single surface.[1]

In the same year, the same man commissioned the Aqua Appia, the first aqueduct Rome had built, which carried water from a spring approximately sixteen thousand paces east of the city through an almost entirely underground channel to the working districts near the Porta Trigemina. Two monuments of this scale, both begun in a single censorial year, would by themselves constitute an extraordinary legacy for any administrator in any era. They were not the whole of what Appius Claudius Caecus did.[2]

During the censorship of 312 BC, Appius also conducted the most controversial revision of the senatorial list in Republican history, enrolling men whose fathers had been freed slaves and whose social status placed them far outside the boundaries of what the senatorial class considered appropriate. He undertook a redistribution of voting-class citizens across the tribal structure that touched both the comitia tributa and the comitia centuriata—what Livy summarized, with the acid compression of a hostile tradition, as having 'corrupted the forum and the field of Mars' (forum et campum corrupit). He was the patron behind the publication, through his client Gnaeus Flavius, of the calendar of court days and the forms of legal action that had been a monopoly of the pontifical college: a democ-

ratization of legal knowledge whose consequences were felt for generations. He composed verse, possibly the earliest surviving Latin poetry outside of religious formulae and made an anti-Pyrrhus speech before the Roman Senate, probably in the winter of 280/279 BC, that Ennius thought worth versifying for his Annals, that Varro called the first prose speech in Latin, and that Cicero still had a copy of three centuries after it was delivered.[3]

No English-language monograph exists on Appius Claudius Caecus. This absence is not a function of the thinness of the record—the record for his censorship alone is richer than what survives for most figures this series has examined. It reflects instead the fragmentation of his legacy across disciplines and the absence of a sustained synthetic effort in English. The road is famous; the man who ordered it is known in parts. This volume attempts to assemble the parts.

The Problem of the Tradition

Appius Claudius Caecus is a figure about whom ancient writers felt strongly. The tradition is neither neutral nor unified. As Humm's exhaustive source-critical analysis demonstrates, at least two distinct and conflicting traditions shaped how Appius was remembered: an anti-Claudian tradition, probably rooted in the senatorial annalists of the late second century BC, that presented him as a demagogue whose ambitions threatened the

constitution; and a more favorable tradition, preserved above all in Cicero, that made him a model of active old age, effective oratory, and republican statesmanship.[4]

The anti-Claudian tradition drew on something real. Appius was a patrician of one of Rome's most distinguished families who used the censorship to enroll freedmen's sons in the Senate, redistribute the votes of the poor across the tribal system, and publish legal knowledge that the priestly aristocracy had kept private. By the standards of his peers, these were provocations. The senatorial establishment reversed his tribal reform within eight years. His census innovations were disputed in the sources for centuries. His social base—the forensis factio, the urban crowd, and its newly empowered political weight—was undoubtedly the constituency that conservative writers from Livy onward associated with demagogy and constitutional disorder.

But the hostile tradition also reflects purposes and interests that are not Appius's. Humm has identified the probable influence of L. Calpurnius Piso Frugi, annalist and senator of the late second century BC, in shaping the Livian account of the censorial reforms. Piso was an opponent of the Gracchi and a defender of senatorial privilege; the vocabulary Livy uses for Appius's reforms—turba forensis, factio, forum et campum corrupit—is

demonstrably Ciceronian and refers to categories of political conflict that took shape in the Gracchan and Sullan periods, not in 312 BC. Reading Livy on Appius requires reading Livy on the late Republic simultaneously.[5]

The Pythagorean Argument

The most intellectually original contribution of Humm's work is the argument that Appius's reforms were inspired, at least in part, by the Pythagorean political philosophy of Archytas of Tarentum. Archytas, a statesman, mathematician, and philosopher, governed Tarentum as a philosopher-king during the first third of the fourth century BC. His political philosophy centered on the concept of 'geometric equality' (isotēs geometrikē)—the principle that political rights and obligations should be distributed not arithmetically (one person, one share) but proportionally to each citizen's contribution and standing. This principle, which Plato encountered when he visited Archytas and which shaped the political thinking of the Academy, found its way into the Roman censitary system: the five-class organization of the comitia centuriata, in which the richest citizens had the most votes but also the most military and fiscal obligations, embodies exactly this Pythagorean balance between rights and duties proportional to fortune.[6]

Humm's argument is that Appius, whose political connections with Tarentum and the

Hellenized south of Italy are documented in multiple ways, was familiar with this Pythagorean framework and applied it deliberately to his censorial reforms. The creation of the comitia tributa as a new assembly, in which citizens voted regardless of fortune but in which the tribal distribution still reflected a kind of geographic and social ordering, complemented the centuriate system rather than replacing it. The enrollment of freed slaves' sons into the Senate and the registration of the poor in all tribes expanded the civic body according to principles of inclusion that the Pythagorean tradition, in its Archytan form, would have recognized as justice.[7]

Whether Appius understood himself as a Pythagorean reformer is a question the evidence cannot answer. What Humm's argument establishes is that the reforms make more sense when seen against the background of Hellenistic political philosophy than when considered simple demagogy. A man who composed sententiae that Cicero recognized as Pythagorean in character (Pythagoreum videtur), who was personally connected to the most Hellenized regions of Italy, and who introduced the 'ideology of victory' associated with Hellenistic royal courts into the religious vocabulary of Rome was not a politician operating purely within the inherited categories of Roman aristocratic competition. He was something more unusual: a Roman politician

who had thought seriously about the Greek world and brought some of what he found there back to Rome.

Notes

1. For the ancient sources on the Via Appia: Livy, Ab Urbe Condita, IX.29.6-8; Frontinus, De Aquaeductu, I.5; Diodorus Siculus, XX.3 6.1-2; elogium, CIL I^2.1, p. 192, no. X (= ILS 54; Inscr.It. XIII.3.79). Humm (2005), ch. 10, and Humm, M., 'Appius Claudius Caecus et la construction de la via Appia,' MEFRA 108 (1996), pp. 693-746.

2. Frontinus, De Aquaeductu, I.5; Evans (1994), pp. 7-12; Ashby (1935), pp. 33-46.

3. On the speech: Plutarch, Life of Pyrrhus, 18-19; Malcovati (1953), pp. 1-4; Cicero, Brutus, 61 (extat oratio); on Ennius versifying the speech: Cicero, Cato Maior, 16; on Varro and priority: discussed in Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria, X.1.2.

4. Humm (2005), Préambule ('Sources et traditions historiographiques'). For the anti-Claudian tradition: Wiseman (1979), pp. 57-79.

5. Humm (2005), Préambule, on Piso Frugi as probable source of hostile elements in Livy. On the Ciceronian vocabulary imported into Livy's account: Humm (2005), Préambule.

6. Humm (2005), ch. 11, on the Pythagorean framework. Archytas: Huffman, C.A., Archytas of Tarentum (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 1-50; von Fritz (1977), pp. 94-102.

7. Humm (2005), ch. 11, on geometric equality as the unifying principle of the censorial reforms.