

Specimen Subterranean: A Review

by strannikov

Subterranean: Sicily to Paris by Col. G. D. Pemberfield (Ret.) [Chicago, IL: First Circle Press, 2nd ed., 2015, xxviii + 404 pp., 16 color plates, 42 maps, cloth, \$44.95, ISBN 0-1X12-0102-9]

This welcome reprint of a title first published in 1957 offers travelers all they'll need to traverse practically the entire distance from Sicily to Paris (or from Paris to Sicily) underground.

The author, a US Army Corps of Engineers veteran of the "Operation Husky" campaign (the Allies' WWII invasion of Sicily), opens with the interesting tidbit that at least parts of both the Axis retreat and the Allied advance from Sicily to mainland Calabria in 1943 were undertaken beneath the Strait of Messina: more robust movements of forces were impossible for tanks and troop transport trucks of the period. The submarine corridor linking Sicily with mainland Italy has been known since antiquity and has been used chiefly by smugglers going one way or the other (Hannibal's invasion by way of the Alps was an early testimony to the narrowness of some of the crevices some twenty meters beneath the Strait of Messina, but a single-file column of light infantry can still march from Mortelle to Scilla, or from Ganzirri to Canitello, in just a few hours: the Carthaginians' unwillingness to invade from the south without their elephants of course added months to Hannibal's Punic campaign).

While Col. Pemberfield's account does offer insight as to what lies aboveground along the circuitous route from Cape Peloro to Rome, the surface features of Calabria particularly pale in comparison to the descriptions and photos of the (mostly) naturally carved formations that vary in depth from just a few meters to over a hundred meters when passing beneath the Savuto River. (It was

French author Jules Verne's visit to the subterranean gorge beneath the Savuto River in 1858 that gave him the impetus for his classic adventure Journey to the Center of the Earth. It was Verne who dubbed the underground forty-meter waterfall "Newton's Falls" in honor of the British physicist and alchemist.)

Although earthquakes and volcanic activity around Naples regularly close up underground passages between Naples and Amalfi (even while creating new ones), Col. Pemberfield's thorough mapping shows that to the east are two long-used pathways that have never been obstructed. The more famous of these runs the entire 218 km length of the Cazzarini Massif, generally from southeast to northwest between Taranto and Campobasso. Bypassing Naples, this route permits the enterprising underground tourist to trek at least to Carpinone, just southeast of the National Park of Abruzzo. (Presently, Italian authorities do not permit underground travel through the park due to seismic and geothermal activity: but Col. Pemberfield's maps—remarkably accurate after almost six decades—show the two underground routes that were navigable at least until the 1986 quake that destroyed the village of San Niccolo di Pizzuti and lowered the water level in nearby Lake Agni by five meters.)

Col. Pemberfield's account records that just as all roads led to Rome in antiquity, so did the underground pathways. What nature did not provide in the form of naturally carved tufa formations was augmented by human excavation, and the extensions from the Roman catacombs eastward testify to the diligence and ingenuity of Roman engineers. The elaborate network spreading north and east of Rome eventually connected with earlier Etruscan efforts running from Orvieto to Volterra. Late in the second century CE, the older Etruscan network along the eastern slopes of the Chiana Valley (west and north of Perugia) was extended by Roman engineers all the way from present-day Arezzo in an arc north-northwest around Florence to Prato. This so-called "Appenine Way" then coursed almost due west, then ran parallel to the Ligurian coastline and the Via Aurelia until ending 12 km east of Genoa. Admittedly, several

corridors between Prato and Genoa now run above ground after centuries of erosion and nearby marble quarrying, but the greater length of the so-called “Montebaldi Corridor” (running from north of Lucca to the endpoint east of Genoa, first mapped by the 17th century explorer Luigi Montebaldi) can still be walked without the least exposure to direct sunlight as long as the traveler is not active from 9 am to 3 pm local time.

Col. Pemberfield's wartime studies and explorations initially led him to chart only the network of underground passages linking Messina with Genoa: only after the war did he discover the long-rumored trans-Alpine “Helvetic Corridor” leading completely underground from a point 9 km west of present-day Torino all the way to the southern outskirts of Geneva, where it connected with a separate series of tunnels extending north and west to Paris. The existence of this tunnel system was rumored from the end of the 18th century: in vain did Napoleon threaten both Church authorities in Paris and municipal authorities in Geneva for information on its existence. Apparently, Swiss and Savoyard engineers and workmen had excavated the continuous trail beginning sometime in the early to mid-17th century, though Col. Pemberfield registers grave doubts about its military utility, since much of the corridor is less than a meter in width and well under two meters in height. (Conjectures that it was designed for commercial purposes are likewise unconvincing.) Whatever its original purpose, it seldom affords more than a series of lengthy, uncomfortable stoops for the underground traveler, though periodic openings offer splendid Alpine vistas providing welcome reward and relief.

The Paris-to-Geneva corridor was not completed until well after Napoleon's day, and as with the networks linking Geneva with Calabria, it never offered any military utility. (The French Underground did use the tunnel to evacuate civilians during the Occupation and to run couriers to Geneva and into Axis Italy but never dared compromise the system by using it to stage commando operations.) The sections closest to Paris remain subject to flooding, and French authorities have refused entry to the system since

fourteen adventurers on two expeditions drowned east of Pèrè-Lachaise in the late 1970s.

Col. Pemberfield's grandson Jarrod assisted editors at First Circle by writing a Preface explaining his grandfather's interest in and (re-)discoveries of the many independent systems of tunnels, excavations, catacombs, and passageways that practically link northeastern Sicily to Paris (Col. Pemberfield died in a 1982 climbing accident before he could devote time to a second edition himself).

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