

ANCIENT ROMAN ROADS

The ancient Romans built a good system of roads throughout their empire. Roads were the arteries of ancient civilizations and building a road was a massive public work in Roman times.

The most important roads were called *viae publicae* (public roads) and were funded by the state. Then came *viae militares* (military roads), funded by the army, and the local roads. Finally there were *privatae* (private roads), built and maintained by their owners.

A Roman road consisted of three layers: a bottom foundation often of stone; a middle layer of softer material (such as sand or gravel), and a surfacing, usually of gravel, sometimes of paving stones.

However the structure of the road varied according to the available materials and the firmness of the soil. Roman roads were generally laid out in a straight line and were supported by a solid embankment of varying height and width called *agger*. This embankment could consist of an earth bank or could be built up in layers of stony materials. The *agger* was the foundation of the road.

The Romans used local materials to build their roads and drainage was essential in keeping the road firm. The middle layer was constructed upon the road's foundation and was then covered by the topmost surface, which varied and was not always paved. When available, gravel, flint and other small, broken stone were used to pave roads. Country roads were often simply surfaced with sand or pebbles. The total depth of a road, from surface to the

bottom of the base, could reach 1 to 1.5 meters and the surface was sloped to each side from the centre. Roads varied greatly in width depending on their function, importance and the nature of terrain. The widest road, called *decumanus maximus*, was about 12 metres, while byroads were about 2.40 metres wide. Countryside roads were generally six metres wide to allow vehicles to pass.

The width of the street also varied depending on the surrounding buildings and whether there was a portico on the pavement.

Another feature of Roman roads was the presence of ditches, which served various functions. One type of ditch was a sort of quarry, not only draining the water from the surface, but also providing material for the surfacing of the road. Another type was a strip of land on which cultivation and building were forbidden. This strip was used for grazing or as a means of defense to prevent roadside ambush.



READING COMPREHENSION

● Answer the following questions.

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| ① What were the main types of roads in Roman times? | ③ What materials were they made of? |
| ② Describe the different layers which formed a road. | ④ What was a <i>decumanus maximus</i> ? |
| | ⑤ Speak about the depth and the width of a road. |

ACTIVITIES



VOCABULARY

● Read the text again and find the English equivalents of the following Italian words.

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|--------------|-------|----------|-------|
| ① Finanziare | | ④ Ghiaia | |
| ② Strato | | ⑤ Fossa | |
| ③ Terrapieno | | ⑥ Selce | |