One might assume that the history of cartography is a timeline of maps with gradually increasing accuracy, but there is a longstanding and still strong tradition of geographic imprecision in mapping. One of the earliest known maps in history, the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, warps Europe so that the entire isthmus of Italy runs horizontally, separated by what looks like a small creek from the coast of North Africa. This creek is, in fact, the Tyrrenian Sea.

This is not a depiction of continental drift, nor is it the result of a horrifying ancient surveying accident involving untrained interns. It is a very intentional distorting of geographic features in order to make the map’s primary subject more legible: the *cursus publicus*. It is a map of every public road in the ancient Roman Empire.
The *Tabula Peutingeriana* only has its name because a guy named Konrad Peutinger owned it in the 1500s. It is eleven sheets of vellum which, together, form a map about 13 inches tall and 23 feet wide. It was made by a monk in the 13th century, but is a copy of a much, much older original, probably from the 4th century A.D. We know this because the map includes such hot destinations as Pompeii, which wasn’t rediscovered until the 18th century. And that’s an incredible thought, that a monk sat down to hand-copy a map which contained references to long-destroyed cities still waiting to be rediscovered. Like a fiery Atlantis. And there are almost certainly cities on the *Tabula* still waiting to be found underneath our modern world.

Cities on the map are connected by red lines, the roads, and they do not all lead to Rome, but twelve do. Rome is, however, by far the most prominent city on the map.

By intentionally distorting space, the *Tabula Peutingeriana* avoids the illegible cluster of roads which would form around major cities on a geographically to-scale rendition of the empire. Areas such as these are expanded so that all cities and roads may be clearly read, while more
barren areas benefit from a contraction of space. Because distances on the Tabula Peutingeriana are not to scale, each road segment is annotated with its distance in miles.

Today, most cities’ subway maps continue the Tabula’s tradition of warping space for the sake of clarity, a convention that began in 1931 with Harry Beck, a bored signals engineer working for the London Underground. At the time, the printed London Tube Map was essentially a tangle of lines superimposed on a typical street map, but Beck began sketching the tube network following the same rules as the circuit diagrams he was accustomed to designing, where it does not matter how long a wire is drawn or where it bends, only that it shown connected to the correct components. By freeing himself from the street grid, Beck was able to warp the map so that all tube lines ran in straight lines at angles of 45° increments. Beck’s breakthrough was to suggest that, once a passenger entered the tube system, she no longer had much need to refer to the street grid above for orientation, and geographic accuracy was sacrificed for the sake of systemic clarity. Within a few years, New
York City had adopted a similar geographic flexibility in its official subway map.

With the *Tabula Peutingeriana* as evidence, I suspect the Roman traveler felt much the same way when he set out on the Roman roads. Once he had decided upon a journey, an accurate picture of the geography mattered very little, only the relevant cities and the roads which existed—or didn’t exist—between them. The map I have created helps a native New Yorker comprehend that feeling by translating one small segment of the *Tabula*, roughly from Pisa to Pompeii, into the familiar style of the MTA’s New York City Subway Map. Daily, New Yorkers trust a wildly distorted map to guide them from origin to destination, through transfers and obscurely-named stops. By seeing some of the *Tabula Peutingeriana’s* information presented in a familiar and equally distortionary format, anybody familiar with NYC subways may be able to feel, just for a bit, like an ancient Roman traveler.

And much like the MTA, the author of the *Tabula* encountered the confusion of disparate but similarly-named locations. The MTA has its plethora of stops named “14 St.” On the *cursus*, note the abundance of cities named “Vmbra Fl.” Some pleasant parallels between the
MTA and the *cursus publicus* emerged. As the routes took shape, a road emerged which functions similarly to the MTA’s L train, running perpendicular to the majority of routes and shuttling travelers across and between the rest of the system. The MTA’s runs horizontally in a primarily vertical system; the *cursus*’ vertically. While other routes were christened with their representative route letter according to their *Tabula*-given names,¹ this one has been deemed the L train in homage to New York City’s own, and I suspect one could never expect to get from Adnovas to Maniliana without delays.

¹ I: *via Inima*
H: *via Hostensis*
A: *via Appia*
P: *via Poisia* (fabricated)
L: *via L* (fabricated)
Works Cited


euratlas.net/cartogra/peutinger.

By a slight but helpful margin, the scans offered here are a bit better than the ones which comprise Talbert’s seamless map. Here they are, however, split into tiles.

tabula-peutingeriana.de/tp/tpx.html

The author is shrouded in mystery but this proved to be another helpful database of place names on the map.


& the wonderful online supplemental data available at cambridge.org/us/talbert. Talbert’s feature database was instrumental for confirming my reading of the map’s spelling, and I used his conjectural routes between Invinias, Pyteolis, and Neapoli. His seamless map with annotated layers is hosted courtesy of the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World at New York University at peutinger.atlantides.org/map-a.

Various contributors. “Historical Maps.” nycsubway.org/wiki/Historical_Maps

Wonderfully-kept collection of immaculately-scanned historical New York City transit maps.

Voorberg, René. *OMNESVIAE: ROMAN ROUTEPLANNER.* omnesviae.org

One of the more straightforward of a few attempts to map the *Tabula Peutingeriana* network to a modern geography. I found it useful for confirming obfuscated lines and locations on *Tabula Peutingeriana* scans. Be warned that Voorberg occasionally fudges with the network (creating new connections) to keep his routeplanning function fun.


Article published when the *Tabula* was the centerpiece of a show at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, which I highly wish I had attended.