WATER IN abundance. That is one’s first impression of Rome, with its hundreds of fountains and thousands of street-corner, hydrantlike nasoni running around the clock; the Tevere (the Tiber River—we’ll use the Italian) deliciously meandering through its center; the baths of Caracalla testifying to the pleasures the ancients derived from a surfeit of water; and here and there, glimpses of the globe’s most fabled water system: the aqueducts.

That first impression isn’t wrong, but it is incomplete, even misleading. The romantic view of the aqueducts obscures the fact that they were necessary—that the Tevere and its tributary, the Aniene, did not for long meet the city’s water needs—and that they were vulnerable, that Rome could be (and was) brought to its knees by a military force strong enough to sever the aqueducts and cut off the water supply. For all its meandering charm and utility as a commercial avenue, for most of two millennia the Tevere has been either a force of destruction, flooding the city at frequent intervals or, in the twentieth century and today, a boring irrelevancy. Indeed, Rome’s relationship to water might be understood as akin to the experiences of Los Angeles, constrained to bring water from long distances to bring life to its desert basin, and New Orleans, a city that tamed the mighty Mississippi only to find it disappearing from view and from the consciousness of its residents.
In this chapter we explore the waters of Rome. We begin with the *Parco degli Acquedotti* (Park of the Aqueducts) on the periphery, where one can best observe and appreciate these remarkable constructions and the link they forged between distant streams and springs and the needy city of Rome. The second itinerary brings the story into the city, where the aqueduct Acqua Paola hugs the Gianicolo Hill to fill one of Rome’s great fountains. And we conclude with a journey on the banks of the Tevere, where the river testifies at once to its destructive past and its anomalous present.

**ITINERARY 1: ROME AND ITS AQUEDUCTS: PARCO DEGLI ACQUEDOTTI**

Today, Rome’s water supply flows into the city through aqueducts, just as it did 2,000 years ago. But it was not always so. For 450 years, before Rome was an empire and before Rome had emperors, the city was watered only by springs, wells, and the Tevere. As the city’s population increased, and the need for additional sources of water became clear, the aqueduct appeared as a solution. The first aqueduct was built in the fourth century BC, and by AD 226 there were eleven, bringing in more water than the city could use, filling (by AD 410) more than twelve hundred public fountains and sustaining what historian H. V. Morton has labeled the “Cult of the Bath.” These monumental structures took their water from a variety of sources. The aqueduct *Aqua* (Water) Anio Vetus, forty miles long and mostly underground, carried water from the Aniene River, near Vicovaro in the Lucretili Mountains, not far from Horace’s farm (the remains of which you can see today in this town just beyond Tivoli). Aqua Marcia, fifty-six miles long (six miles of above-ground arches as it neared Rome), was fed by springs near Subiaco, at the base of the Simbruini Mountains; it terminated on Rome’s Capitoline Hill.

The Subiaco springs were also the source of Aqua Claudia, which terminated on the *Celian* (Celio) Hill, just above the Coliseum. Acqua Paola, which entered Rome on the Gianicolo Hill, brought to the city the eel-infested waters of Lake Bracciano, to the northwest. (The different spellings—Aqua and Acqua—are customary; the former refers to ancient
aqueducts, the latter to “modern” ones built after 1500). As new aqueducts were built, Rome’s engineers sometimes put them on top of the old ones, a clever, economical solution to aqueduct building that one can best observe at Piazza di Porta Maggiore, where the holes of Aqua Julia and Aqua Tepula are clearly visible as they ride on top of those of Aqua Marcia.

HOW THE AQUEDUCTS WORKED . . . OR DIDN’T WORK

The aqueducts were a remarkable achievement; it is not too much to say that they allowed Rome to emerge as a great city not once but twice. That some of them still exist and function two thousand years after they were built is testimony to the skills of Roman engineers and builders. In addition, Romans understood and used engineering principles that allowed them to move water uphill when necessary. Most of the time, water in the aqueducts moved downhill by gravity, but knowledge of the principle of the “inverted siphon”—the idea that liquids moving from a higher point to a lower point can go uphill for part of the journey as long as the end point is lower—allowed them to lift water onto Rome’s hills.

Even so, the aqueducts were not without flaws and problems. Although lined with special cement, they leaked badly, especially when the structures were above ground. Some of the leaks were intentional, created by watermen (the men, often slaves, who kept the structures in repair) who were bribed by landowners along the route of the aqueducts. In some ways, the economics and politics of Rome’s water supply resembled those of twentieth-century Los Angeles, another city that had to bring its water from far away, as depicted in Roman Polanski’s 1974 film Chinatown.

The Roman Empire didn’t last forever, and neither did its aqueducts. They were cut by the invading Goths in AD 537 and then destroyed, with enormous consequences for a city that had grown accustomed to plentiful water. The city’s corn mills, driven by aqueduct water, gradually migrated from the Gianicolo to the banks of the Tevere, where rafts moored in the river provided the necessary waterpower. Fountains dried up. Fresh water, now in short supply, became by scarcity “holy water.” Over the centuries, Rome’s population moved toward the river, creating the portion of the city now described as medieval Rome.