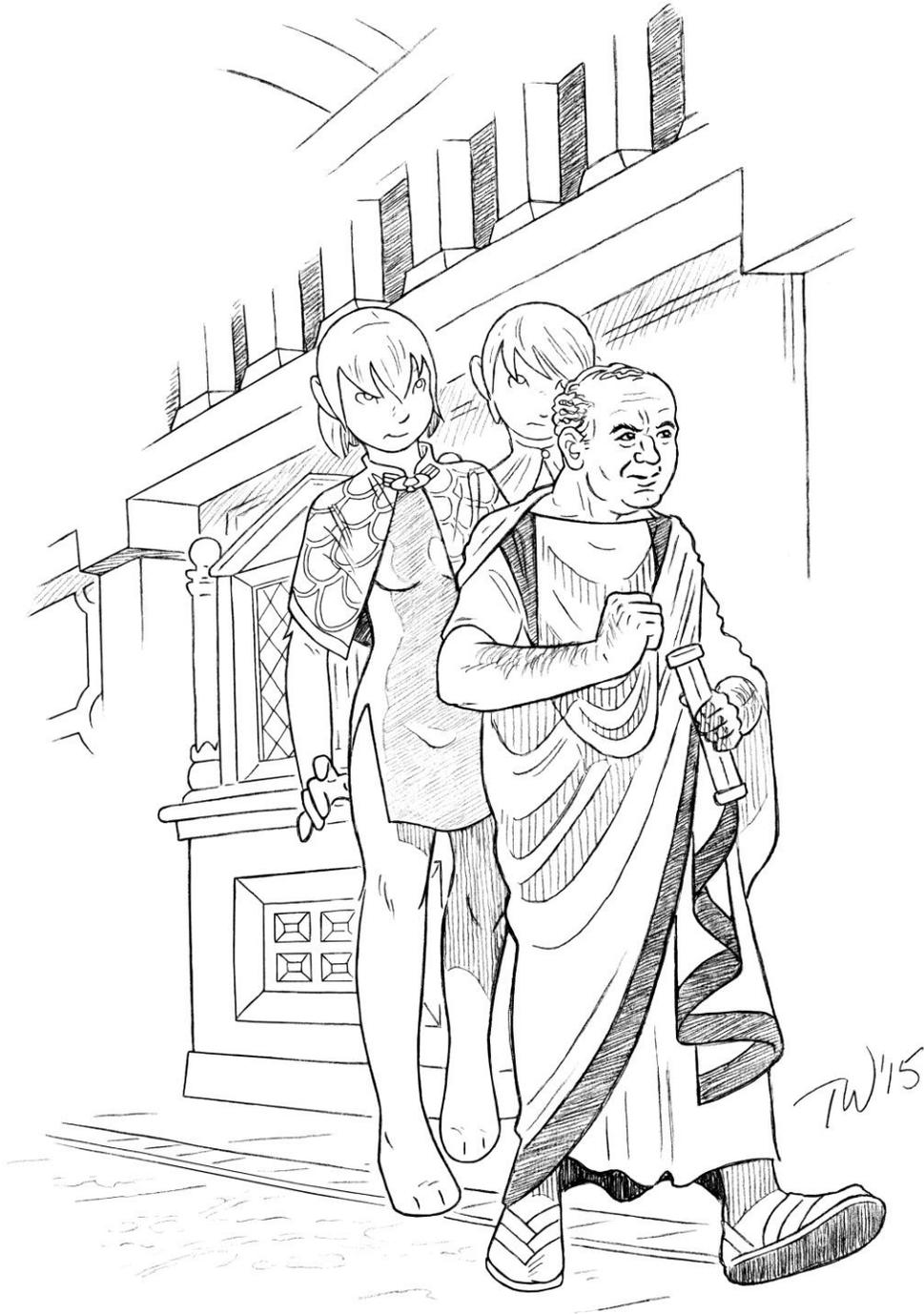


THE PLEASURE OF RUINS

(A non-boring non-academic Fanzine devoted to archaeological trivia)

Issue #3 – August 2015

published by [R. Graeme Cameron](#)



FRONT COVER

Taral Wayne contributes a sketch of Alien diplomat Saara Mar following the Emperor Vespasian to a meeting room in his palace to discuss the paucity of interplanetary trade. (Saara an iconic Taral creation.)

*“I must always ensure that the working classes
earn enough money to buy themselves food.”* – Emperor Vespasian

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“Galba’s genius inhabits a hovel.” – Marcus Lollius

THE WAR BETWEEN THE CHINESE AND ROMAN EMPIRES

The Chinese have made a movie about it so you know it must be true.

“Dragon Blade,” released in February 2015 in China but not in North America as yet, and costing the equivalent of \$65 million US dollars, is the most expensive film that nation has ever produced.

It has an international cast featuring Jackie Chan as a Han Dynasty Commander, Adrien Brody as Roman General Tiberius whose mission is to seize the overland trade route to China, and John Cusack as some sort of renegade Roman General who apparently sides with the Chinese, judging from the fact he and Jackie Chan’s character become allies. I strongly suspect the Romans are portrayed as the bad guys (except for Cusack’s character.) No doubt there’s a love triangle in there somewhere, though not between the three Generals I hasten to add...

Anyway, the movie’s PR people have assured everyone the film is based on reports of an actual battle between Roman Legionnaires and Han Dynasty soldiers. Most people dismiss this as B.S. The odd thing is, the story is true, or at least, as true as anything recorded in Roman and Chinese historical literature.

Bear in mind the two empires certainly knew of each other's existence. The Romans called China "Seres," and the Chinese called the Roman Empire "Ta-ch'in." (I wonder if that translates as "way the hell beyond the borders of China.") Point is attempts were made to establish direct contact.

A Chinese military officer named Kan Ying got as far as the western frontier of the Parthian Empire (the middleman in the trade relations) but was turned back from crossing the frontier into Roman Syria by the Parthians (firmly intent on maintaining their middleman economic status). A Chinese embassy, possibly just merchants, came across the Indian Ocean and up the Red sea and then overland to Alexandria, but that's as far as they got. With what result nobody knows.

And a Roman embassy, also possibly just merchants, sailed from India around Southeast Asia and up the Chinese coast and then overland or up a river to whatever city was currently the capital, but their gifts failed to impress the Emperor of the period. Both "embassies" were probably little more than early versions of Marco Polo, i.e. agents for mercantile interests and nothing to do with their respective governments whatsoever.

A wealthy Roman merchant by name of Maes Titianus who lived at the same time as Kan Ying is known to have been envied by other western silk merchants because of the sheer number of his agents operating throughout what came to be known later in Polo's time as "The Silk Road." Some of Titianus' agents reached China itself. They are the source of the revelation to the Romans that silk was not in fact combed from trees (as Virgil believed) but was produced from insects of some sort.

The odd thing is they thought the insects in question were eight-legged beetles which, in their fifth year of life, were given green rushes to eat, food they ate so greedily they burst open and revealed silk yarn in their bellies. Right. I strongly suspect that the agents were never given a tour of a Chinese silk "factory" but instead were fed a line of bull by Chinese merchants anxious to retain their production monopoly (which they did till some Byzantine monks smuggled live silkworms back to the Eastern Roman Empire).

There are a number of other contacts mentioned in sources. And no doubt many more for which no record has survived. Considering that the Romans had six permanent trading posts on the west coast of India and one in what is now Sri Lanka, it would not be surprising if some enterprising merchants occasionally took ship on native craft sailing east of India. Unfortunately anything they learned would probably be jealously regarded as "trade secrets" and writing it down for general circulation is probably not anything they would care to do.

Besides, the Roman government would probably have suppressed the information. Ease of trade with China is the last thing they wanted. The Emperors were fed up with the gigantic volumes of gold coins being traded east for silk, spices, coconuts and other exotic items. Merchants in India, for instance, were notorious, when dealing with western merchants, for accepting only gold coins in exchange for their products. They were even cheeky enough to complain when the Romans began debasing their coinage. Roman merchants, on the other hand, could barter whatever products they brought to India for assorted goods, but were never paid in gold. So call it a growing trade deficit. Sorta similar to the modern America/China trade relationship. The good news is the Romans eventually solved the problem. The bad news is they did this by letting themselves be overrun by barbarians.

"Watch out! The Huns are at the gates!"

"Thank god. Hope they get in. I'll be debt free forever!"

Speaking of the Huns, they helped arrange the battle between the Romans and the Chinese. Therein lies the tale...

There was this unspeakably rich bastard named Marcus Licinius Crassus. Mass-murdering bastards Pompey the Great and Julius Caesar the Greater Than Great invited him to join what became known as the First Triumvirate, kind of an early attempt at the Three Stooges, to circumvent the power of the Roman Senate. Crassus was considered quite an idiot and militarily incompetent (the original Curly?). Pompey and Caesar at that time were essentially penniless military geniuses.

“With your money and our armies we’ll have it made!” they cried. Crassus was very naïve methinks.

And jealous. He wanted to prove he was a military genius too. So gathering an army of raw recruits and mercenary malcontents, he invaded the single most powerful nation on the Roman frontier, namely the Parthian Empire. As a result, in 53 B.C. while approaching the city of Carrhae his army of seven legions, approximately 40,000 men, was completely annihilated by a mere 10,000 Parthian cavalry equipped with bows and arrows.

Side note: the phrase “parting shot” comes from “Parthian shot,” which referred to the habit of Parthian cavalry always keeping just out of the range of Roman weapons by trotting off into the distance while twisting about on their horses to fire arrows backwards with deadly accuracy. Frustrating and fatal for the Romans.

I suspect Pompey and Caesar were rather pleased. Saved them the trouble of purging Crassus and his followers once they had all his money. Dashed convenient, actually.

A number of Roman soldiers managed to surrender. They were sent to the oasis city of Merv on the eastern frontier of the Parthian Empire to add to the strength of a garrison that was in frequent hostile contact with the Huns (who at that time were mostly preoccupied with trying to invade China and had not yet begun their long trek west toward the Roman Empire).

So much for western sources. Now the Han Chinese annals kick in.

The Chinese knew Merv as Mu’lu. Apparently some or all of the Romans, organized as a military unit, retaining their weapons and discipline, fled east at the earliest opportunity (they could hardly have fled west). A Hunnish tribal leader, one of many, by the name of Jzh-jzh, hired them as mercenaries. Probably not a fun guy. He murdered some Chinese envoys for not showing enough respect. They must have been idiots.

As a result the Chinese army invaded the territory ruled by Jzh-jzh. At a town on the river Talass, which is close to the modern border of Sinkiang province, the Chinese came across a small encampment consisting of an earthen embankment surrounded by double-walled wooden palisade (like a Roman marching camp) within which “about a hundred foot-soldiers lined up on either side of the gate in a fish-scale formation, were practising military drill.”

“Fish scale” implies overlapping objects and historians take this to refer to the “testudo” formation of overlapping shields commonly used by the Romans.

The Chinese promptly attacked and sacked the town, but offered to hire the Romans. Since Jzh-jzh had already been captured and beheaded, there seemed no point in continuing to work for him, so the Romans agreed to join the Chinese army and accompanied them on their march back to the empire.

Chinese military intelligence must have questioned them closely, because written reports (and possibly illustrations) describing standard Roman tactics and customs, including a typical Roman Triumph, were forwarded to the court of the Han Dynasty Emperor Yüan. Rather oddly, the author of the particular annal discussing this unique event records that the court ladies were quite excited by the report. One wonders why. Perhaps there was an addenda describing Roman sexual habits.

At any rate there is no extant evidence that any “sample” Roman soldier was ever presented at court. But it is a possibility. I wouldn’t rule it out. In fact I wouldn’t be surprised if the makers of “Dragon Blade” made use of the concept for dramatic purposes.

What is known is that the Chinese census of 1 A.D. lists a newly established town in Western China with the odd name of Li-jien, odd because that was the Chinese generic name for the territory of the Roman Empire and its surrounding barbarians, or to put it another way, for all the lands west of the Parthian Empire. Scholars speculate this is where the “lost” Roman soldiers were eventually settled.

It gets better. The modern version of the town and the surrounding region have long been noted for a percentage of inhabitants who look somewhat western. Recently the Chinese government conducted a massive DNA study which proved that some of these people’s ancestors did indeed come from the Mediterranean region. There is a distinct possibility that these people are descended from the veterans who fought for the Great Idiot Crassus. Bloody amazing if true.

Probably the publicity surrounding this revelation triggered the making of the movie. It could be good, it might be bad, but I bet it’s a hoot to watch. Can’t wait to see it.

Okay, so there was no war between the Romans and the Chinese. Maybe not even a battle. Maybe just a series of contract talks. “Your shiny armour is real pretty. We want you to work for us.” But contact by the Gods! Palpable contact!

Wouldn’t it be cool if one of these Roman veterans dictated his memoirs? And had the scrolls buried in an airtight container in his tomb surrounded by tons of dry clay in the Chinese upper-class-twit style as opposed to Roman cremation? And the scrolls are recovered? Deciphered? And it turns out the Roman soldier in question combined the sharp wit of Juvenal with the observation skills of a Tacitus or an Ammianus Marcelinus? Wouldn’t that be hyper cool? Really neat and nifty?

Yes, it would, but it’s not going to happen. Sigh.

“I want Cicero to cross over to the enemy, so that he’ll have us to fear.” – Pompey the Great

STATUES AIN’T IMMORTAL

One of the reasons this light-hearted fanzine has been so delayed is that I became rather depressed, at least as far as my enthusiasm for archaeology goes, watching footage of ISIS twits destroying the art and architecture of the ancient Assyrian city of Nimrud. A few weeks before it happened, I remember seeing a film clip of an elderly guard strolling along one of the interior walls of the palace muttering words that were translated as something like “I wonder if ISIS will pay my wages once they get here?”

ISIS used jack hammers to chisel apart particularly attractive Assyrian bas reliefs, some of them quite famous, and then wired up the entire city with barrels of explosives to blow it sky high. I hope they spared the life of the old guard. Probably not. They probably tied him to one of the barrels. That’s the sort of prank they pull with great gusto and glee, as has been documented elsewhere.

It's important to remember that ISIS is far from unique. Throughout history major nations and religious movements have carried out similar acts of destruction against non-believers and their cultural and religious artifacts: sometimes for religious reasons; sometimes out of political motivation.

Examples would include Cromwell's army of Puritans, the Spanish Conquistadors, the Mongols, the Byzantine Iconoclasts, and even the Assyrians themselves, who tended to dismantle any enemy city which failed to surrender promptly when asked. Though sometimes they showed restraint and merely impaled the entire population. It was hard to please the Assyrians.

My point is that it is not amazing so much has been destroyed and gone forever. It is amazing that anything at all has survived man's depredations.

As I have written before, ruins are not static. They keep getting more and more ruined.

And as for statues, they don't last long either. The vast majority of marble statues from the classical era were melted down for lime. Indeed, the famous and reasonably well-preserved statues of the Vestal Virgins were originally found stacked inside a medieval lime kiln, in situ in the Vestal Virgin's palace courtyard, that had been abandoned for some strange reason (maybe because of a lawsuit to do with who had the legal right to "recycle" the Vestals). Another bunch of marble statues, the ones that graced Hadrian's villa, were found sunk in a bog, evidently thrown there by some sort of rampaging mob, probably Christians. (A common event in the later empire.)

Metal statues... how long do you think gold or silver statues lasted once government order broke down? Bronzes were also popular choices for recycling. So useful for so many purposes.



Furthermore, the common impression that ancient sculpture, once excavated, cleaned up, conserved, and then placed in a museum means it will be on display for centuries is not quite accurate as witness this photo of ISIS morons smashing what appears to be Parthian statues in the museum in Mosul. Turns out many of the artifacts they destroyed were plaster copies of the originals which are on display in Baghdad, but should they ever take Baghdad...

Sometimes greed and sheer ignorance destroy valuable artifacts. A completely intact life-sized bronze statue of an ancient Greek athlete, or possibly the god Apollo, was discovered in Gaza, allegedly in the water just offshore. Unlikely. The bronze surface (at least in the first pictures released) was perfectly preserved, as were the inlaid eyes. This is not a statue that had laid for 2.5 millennia in salt water. More likely it was discovered in an illegal excavation, which raises the exciting possibility that similarly well-preserved artifacts await to be discovered at the same site.

Unfortunately the original finders, who offered the statue for sale on Ebay to the highest bidder at a starting price of more than a million dollars US, made no effort to preserve the statue or protect it. One idiot even gouged out the left eye, in the mistaken belief it was made of precious stone, to sell separately.

Eventually the Gaza police seized the statue. They're the guys holding it up for the press to get a good look at. You note that the eye is indeed missing. And that the statue, exposed to oxygen for the first time in centuries, has begun to corrode rather badly. Nothing more has been heard of this cultural treasure, at least nothing that I am aware of. Searching online, I cannot find the original



photos I remember seeing when first brought to the world's attention. You'll just have to take my word for it that the statue was absolutely pristine when first uncovered. Without major restoration and conservation, it may have crumpled by now. There may be nothing left. Pisses me off.

Another example of ancient metal artifacts being destroyed: I remember a brief clip on the news of ISIS supporters in Libya taking sledgehammers to several gilded bronze heads of horses which I suspect were once part of a Roman Quadriga, a bronze sculptural set piece of some corrupt general or another in a chariot drawn by four horses, probably originally atop a triumphal arch. How much else I know nothing about and have never seen (and never will see) is being destroyed daily by these ISIS idiots? Just thinking about this makes me incandescent with rage. So I try not to think about it.



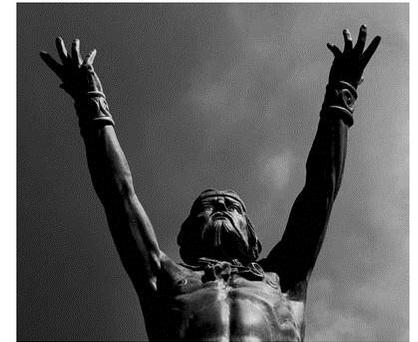
Modern statues are not immune either. As part of an effort to boost tourism a modern statue of the Celtic Sea God Manannán Mac Lir was placed atop a mountain (overlooking the sea I assume) near Limavady, Northern Ireland. Dramatic setting. And a dramatic statue, standing in the prow of his ship with arms upraised to the sky.

Somebody ground through its ankles and bugged off with the statue, leaving behind a five-foot cross inscribed with the words "Thou Shalt Not Have False Gods Before Me." Christians again.

However, statues are bloody heavy. About a week later the statue was found by hikers about a kilometer away lying in a gully and covered with brush. Evidently it had been abandoned. Relatively undamaged I've heard. Tourism officials are contemplating how much it would cost to set back up in its original position.

Of course, some people just like to destroy art for fun. They're called vandals. The original Vandals, a barbarian tribe, would probably resent their modern reputation. "We weren't trying to destroy it. We just wanted to loot it!" But they're stuck with this legacy. At least they aren't forgotten.

It is the fanatics, motivated by unblinking idealism and absolute principles, who do the most damage. Buildings, people, statues, books and anything else creative and beautiful, all deserve to burn in the minds of these madmen. Cultural perverts the lot of them. I'd rather see them burn.



"You should endure what can't be changed, not complain about it." – Publilius Syrius

ANNOYING ROMAN FESTIVALS

(Previously published – apologies to those who've already read it, but I figured it needed a home here.)

I was perusing my copy of Ovid's FASTI which details the festivals of the first six months of the year. He never finished it because he saw something he shouldn't have for which Emperor Augustus exiled him to the tiny port of Tomis on the Black Sea. Most of his subsequent writing consisted of letters begging the Emperor to pardon him. Never happened.

Anyway, got to leafing through his book. It's an epic poem, and virtually unreadable (at least in translation), being so flowery and all:

“When he who bears the purple day on his swift car shall six times have lifted up his disc and as often sunk it low, thou shalt a second time behold horse races on that grassy plain whose side is hugged by the Tiber's winding waters.”

Which I interpret to mean:

“Six days after the first set of races you get to throw away money on a second set of worthless bets while standing knee deep in mud, constantly jostled by other drunks, in that derelict lot down by the river.”

This got me to more thinking (Gawd, what a painful process), what would the FASTI as written by the bitter poet Juvenal have been like? A bit more perusal of the FASTI and I came up with the following:

FEBRUARIUS 23rd: set aside for sacrifice to Terminus, God of fixed boundaries and property. The night before, be sure to shift the boundary markers to expand your property at your neighbour's expense. Come daylight the sacrifice will fix them in place.

MARTIUS 31st: reserved for worshipping the Moon Goddess from atop the Aventine Hill. Good excuse for a moon-lit picnic. You might get laid.

MAI 22nd: festival of ‘Tubilustra’ dedicated to cleaning the trumpets used in the worship of the God Vulcan. The one day of the year you don't have to listen to the damn things.

MAI 29th: festival of ‘Ambarvalia’ celebrating Mars as an agricultural god. Involves the ‘Suovetaurilia’, where you lead a pig, a ram, and a bull all over the place, then burn them alive as an act of purification. Sounds messy. Better have a drink before, during, and after.

JUNIUS 7th: festival of ‘Vestalia’ in honour of Vesta, Goddess of the hearth. Temple of Vesta opened by Vestal Virgins to admit Mothers of families (normally forbidden to enter) for non-stop partying, or as they tell their husbands, a dull affair pouring purified water into a clay vase incapable of standing up on its own (much like the women by the end of the day).

All of the above are authentic Roman festivals, albeit subject to my own interpretation of what really went on. You know I'm right.

“It makes no difference whether a hundred or a thousand amphorae of wine go through your bladder – all you are is a strainer.” – Seneca

HAVE COIN, WILL TRAVEL

by Taral Wayne

Imagine a TAFF race to ancient Rome. I guess it would have to be named something like the “Transtemporal Ancient Fan Fund,” and we'd have to imagine a number of other things – such as the trip not changing future history, or anything like that.

But that is not how *I* imagine it at all. If I had left visiting ancient Rome to an imaginary TAFF, I'm sure I'd still be wondering if it was worth renewing my passport yet again. So I tend to travel via my collection of coins, often in the company of my imaginary friends.

If ancient Rome is your destination, along with seeing the sights, it makes perfect sense to seek an audience with the Emperor. They weren't all raving lunatics or bloodthirsty monsters, after all. In fact, most weren't. In fact, only a few were ... most were simply ambitious men with few scruples, professional soldiers, plodding bureaucrats and even a handful of wretched losers who found themselves in the last place they wanted to be (before inevitably falling to the assassin's knife or poison).

The question, then, is which of the Emperors would be most likely to be a good dinner host? There is no single, best answer to that question of course. Some might seek the company of Julius Caesar himself. He was a brilliant conversationalist, by all accounts, had a penetrating mind and possessed legions of charisma. However, there is just something a little off-putting about a man who disobeyed the Senate when it suited him, creating the very crisis that required him to lead his army back to Rome to avoid prosecution. And what does it say about a man who provokes a war in which close to a million Gauls may have lost their lives, simply to polish up his reputation back home? Not to mention bringing barges full of loot back for his triumph? Charming, erudite, fascinating, yes! But to be honest about it, a low-down, conniving, ruthless snake as well.

You might think that the last of the Julio-Claudian Emperors, Nero, would be the first to strike off your list. You might be judging the man a little hastily, however. While not a good administrator or head of state, Nero was in fact a lavish host and a fairly cultured man, whose chief goal in life seemed to be to make himself a star of the stage and circus. He loved playing the lyre, reciting his poetry, acting and racing chariots. Of course, he always won the prize for his performances, and came first in any chariot race. On one occasion he fell out of the chariot, but won the race anyway ... the other competitors (no fools they) stopped in mid-lap and waited until the Emperor remounted, and the judges declared that, had he not fallen out, he would have won anyhow, so what's the difference?

Granted, Nero *did* murder his mother, Agrippina, and was likely part of the rumoured plot that supposedly poisoned his predecessor, Uncle Claudius, but he was never so uncivilized as to murder just anyone who walked in the door. He would have done his best to entertain a visitor ... and right there is where the problem arises. Nero may have dearly wanted to be a prize-winning poet, musician, singer and athlete, but in fact he was a mediocrity in everything he tried. After an hour of his company, you might well wish he would order *your* execution.

Perhaps Uncle Claudius himself would have been a better choice. Famous today as the astonishingly progressive, thoughtful, ironic man depicted by Robert Graves in his books, the real Claudius was not so attractive as he might seem. While it was true that he wrote a Roman-Etruscan dictionary and other learned works, their style has been described as pedantic and sleep-inducing. (Having read one of his surviving letters, addressed to the City of Alexandria, I must concur.) Nor did all his far-sighted ideas work out as expected – the new harbor in Ostium, for example, silted up, and had to be completely rebuilt by Trajan only 60 years later. What would truly shock the reader of Graves, though, is that Claudius was *not* a humane man. Far from finding the gladiatorial games distasteful, he relished them. According to the 2nd century historian, Suetonius, Claudius was also addicted to gambling and drank intemperately. By his own admission, he was quick to anger, and he has also been described as chicken-hearted.

I shouldn't be too hard on the old sot, though. He was first and foremost a product of his times ... to which it must be added that he had led an unusually traumatic life even for those times, and was literally the last standing survivor of his family when Caligula was murdered. Moreover, after he became Emperor, there were several serious plots against his life that would take the stiffness out of any man's spine. There is some validity

to Robert Grave's insights into the Emperor Claudius – but the reader expecting Derek Jacobi must put *that* notion firmly out of his mind.

Another well-known Emperor who has enjoyed very positive press through history is Marcus Aurelius. He was the last of the “good” Emperors of the Antonine dynasty, whose 84 years of beneficial rule came to an end with the justly maligned Commodus.

While it is merely a Hollywood lie that Commodus murdered his father to get to the throne, it is quite true that he wore a lion skin thrown over his shoulders and head, and liked to pretend he was Hercules. In total contrast with his extroverted and murderous son, Marcus Aurelius was a bookish, philosophical man ... when he wasn't at the front, mowing down Germans with his legions.

Marcus Aurelius not only gets remarkably good press in modern movies, he wrote a memoir that is still read. His *Meditations* was written in the common Greek of the era, and appears to have been done for his own amusement, possibly without any plan to publish. Scholarly opinion seems to regard the book as a collection of straightforward “statements from the heart” that can be understood by the common man as readily as the most abstruse philosopher. In a profession – Emperor – better known for its familiarity with military strategy, it is impressive that Marcus Aurelius found the time for abstract thinking. Surely such an Emperor would make scintillating conversation?

Alas, I have my doubts. Judging from my browsing, *Meditations* is a long-winded catalog of Stoic homilies dressed up in language that is frankly a little too dignified for them. Although the book has been the favourite reading of many great figures in the last two millennia, a few admirers have reluctantly admitted that there is not a word of original philosophy to be found in it. It is a summation of world-weary Stoicism, on the eve of a period of imperial disintegration. I do not think Marcus Aurelius was a man to scintillate. His dinner conversation might have been inclined to ponderous melancholy instead. “This world is a flawed and tragic stage upon which we briefly tread, and we must try not to fluff our lines, however inadequate they may sound to us, or the gods will be unkind to us in the reviews. (Heavy sigh.) Another goblet of wine?”

In past decades, many amateur historians looked upon the Roman Empire as mainly a costume drama to celebrate the triumph of Christianity over the supposedly primitive views of the pagan world. From classics of religious propaganda such as *Ben Hur* and *The Robe*, you get the impression that the average Roman of the first century walked around the Forum either blaming the Christians for every routine house fire, or constantly posing the question to himself whether this Jesus might not be the son of God after all. Actually, most Romans of that century never *heard* of Jesus, and probably had no clear idea at all who Christians were. There is quite literally *no* surviving written record of the Roman Everyman's thoughts on the matter. Some passages in Josephus appear to have been much later interpolations by Christian scribes with more regard for *divine* truth than for commonplace, garden-variety truth. It is by no means clear that Claudius banished *any* Christians from Rome for being disruptive – the text by the historian Suetonius may have referred to disputatious Jews. To most Romans there was no difference. Suetonius wrote his history around 119 AD, in any case, several decades after the events he alluded to. All other references to Christianity in the first century were written by Christians. Yet, somehow, popular belief is that the empire was awash in self-doubt and fear of the new-come King.

If that is your belief, you might consider a dinner date with the first Christian Emperor. Constantine the Great was a convert to Christianity who didn't altogether forbid the forms of pagan worship honored by his ancestors, but made his favoritism pretty clear. Given that fewer than one in ten Romans were likely to have been Christians at this time – some 250 years after Claudius – it seems somewhat doubtful that the religion could have triumphed over the other dozen or so competing Eastern mystery religions without this significant “fix” in a high place. Early Christians were conscious of this debt, and went out of their way to legitimize it with a later fib about how the Emperor actually *deeded* the empire to the Church.

The only problem I see is that Constantine's favourite topic at the dinner table seems to have been theology. He had very clear and specific beliefs, which incidentally did not conform to those of leading theologians of his day, but he *was* the Emperor, after all, and that was a very persuasive argument. In your dinner-time chat, you might want to steer away from touchy subjects such as the exact relationship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Apart from certain inflexibility in his approach to religious matters, Constantine was also vain. Although I don't believe people began to call him "The Great" until after his death, there was still a little matter of moving the imperial capital halfway across the empire and naming the new city *after himself*. And then there were his *wigs*. It seems the Emperor was bald, or balding – hardly the first in a noble line that began with Julius Caesar himself! But Constantine appears to have been the first Caesar to resort to covering his pate with a cheap rug. It must have taken considerable willpower, as well, for his dinner guests not to mention this in his presence, because his wigs would change colour from one day to the next. A simple piece of flattery such as, "You look especially snappy in the bright orange number today, Sire – much nicer than yesterday's blonde curls," might result in a tragic end to an otherwise perfectly charming occasion.

As you can see, I've given the matter of visiting the imperial palace considerable thought. The short list of Emperors I've discussed are only the vanguard of a long parade of assorted psychopaths, amateur philosophers, war criminals, megalomaniacs, mediocrities, monsters, and would-be pop stars. It is time for me to quit shilly-shallying and just come out with it. If I could spend an afternoon with a Roman Emperor, taste his wine, share a meal, browse through his library, which would it be?

Titus Flavius Vespasianus would probably not be the first name that comes to your mind. But I've grown quite fond of the old man, for several reasons.



To begin with, he is the reigning Emperor in a highly successful series of detective novels set in Flavian Rome, circa the middle 70s AD. I remember buying the first book years ago, as a remaindered hardcover. *The Silver Pigs* by Lindsey Davis, is about an ex-soldier named Marcus Didius Falco, who is mustered out of the legions due to a war injury and who has a knack for sticking his nose into other people's business. He is dragooned by Titus, the Emperor's son, into investigating suspicious circumstances at the imperial mines in Cornwall, England. Silver ingots, known as "pigs," have gone missing. As I browsed through the book, it seemed to strike an entertaining balance between the details of Roman history and a hard-boiled detective story. Including his first, excruciating case, which required surviving slavery in a mine, Falco lived through 20 such adventures before finally settling down into modest wealth (left to him by his estranged father), a burgeoning family and equestrian status. His adoptive daughter, a British orphan, seems to have stepped into his shoes and has starred in two novels of her own, so far.

We meet Vespasian himself a handful of times throughout the Falco novels.

The future Emperor began life in somewhat humble circumstances. His father had been a moneylender, and his grandfather a debt collector. No doubt, Vespasian's own frugal, cheeseparating habits in later life were in his genes. As a young man he distinguished himself as a soldier, leading a legion into the west of England in Claudius' invasion of the British Isles. From that triumph, he was sent to Judea to deal with the Jewish uprising that began in 66 AD. The fighting was still not over when new possibilities suddenly arose back in Rome.

Nero had committed suicide in 68, just ahead of the assassins, and a succession of short-lived Emperors had left Rome in an unstable state. The latest incumbent, Vitellius, was disliked and vulnerable. Vespasian, on the

other hand, was widely admired, not only for his military skills, but also for his common sense, honest governance and plain tastes. It didn't hurt his chances, either, that he had two grown sons who might succeed him in orderly fashion. With the assistance of his elder brother back in Rome, the governor of Syria and the prefect of Egypt, Vespasian made his move. Vitellius' troops deserted and then murdered him. Vespasian was acclaimed Emperor by his legions, and hastily confirmed by the Senate.

His first acts were to consolidate his rule, naturally, but he also ensured the Egyptian grain supply to Rome, extended the empire's control of Britain, began an ambitious program of public works and encouraged the arts. He also restored taxes and introduced a few new ones... Vespasian was not going to repeat the mistakes of his predecessors by spending the empire into ruin. Public spectacles, new temples and amphitheatres cost money ... as do loyal legions.

In fact, Vespasian's sound grasp of economics was such that he may well have been the origin of that venerable old Roman saying, "Pecunia non olet." Roughly speaking, that means, "Money has no smell." According to the story, the Emperor's son, Titus, objected to the old man's tax on public urinals. Perhaps that needs a touch of explanation: urine had many uses in those days. Its bleaching ability was valued by tanners, fullers and launderers. These sorts of establishments normally set out buckets in the street for passers-by who might be in need of relief. It was these buckets of priceless piss that Vespasian taxed ... not the pissers-by. His son, who was somewhat of a dandy when he wasn't besieging Jerusalem, thought taxing piss lacked a certain dignity, regardless of the details.

Vespasian was said to have reached into his pocket (so to speak) and pulled out a few coins. Holding them to his son's nose, he said, "Do *you* smell anything? I don't."

I suppose that might make Vespasian look like a crass old moneygrubber, but I think the story is delightful. It shows him as a man with few pretensions and a clear vision. It hardly matters that togas don't have pockets – merely a fold in the cloth, called a *sinus*, that would hardly be suitable for loose coins or after-dinner mints.

Among Vespasian's other endearing traits was that he liked to sit in the palace garden to read. Instead of guests being conducted into a formal study by the majordomo, there to be suitably impressed by magnificent furniture, marble busts and overblown wall murals, visitors were taken out to the garden. There, they found the old man with his nose in a scroll, wearing an everyday tunic and his bedroom slippers! Not only did the Emperor prefer this sort of informal arrangement to an audience in the *tablinum*, he refused to be surrounded by guards. If any came in with the visitor, they would be dismissed to lurk inside.

I don't know about you, but this sounds like a guy you could have a beer with!

Perhaps that's why, of all Roman Emperors, I have more coins minted during Vespasian's reign than any other.

Of course, if you're going to visit ancient times, you want to be prepared. Shots against the most common 20 or 30 diseases would be a good start. Since there were no credit cards, you might also lay in a goodly supply of gold and silver coins. As long as it's at least 90% fine, it won't matter if a coin bears the Emperor's image is on it, an Indian head or George III. Gold has no face. Another sensible precaution would be a 9mm automatic you can easily conceal under your jacket or in a pocket, along with two or three extra, fully loaded magazines. A escort of Marines, in fact, might not be overcautious.

However, for safety's sake, I really only need the company of one special person, and would ask Saara Mar to tag along. She can take on Romans *and* Marines ... maybe even a pagan god or two. Once snug in my *cubiculum*, I'd sleep soundly in perfect security. Would I need to fear poison? Not if she tastes my food first.

“Hmmm. I’m not sure the hellebore goes well with honey-braised dormice ... though it is a bit *presumptuous*. Better send this one back to the chef and have him flogged.” Frankly, after watching her heft a life-size marble figure of Augustus under one arm and move it to the other end of the atrium, I don’t think anyone would even risk insulting my choice of boutonniere. It’s good to have a girlfriend who makes such a splendid traveling companion.

Anyway ... it’s *her* time-machine. I don’t have one.

After pages of digression, I *finally* come to the point. In fact, I’ve said so much that I don’t have much to add. I’ve wanted to draw this picture for a long time, and the reasons above *all* went into it.

To begin with, there is the figure of Vespasian, no simple thing to draw. I began the Emperor from memory, referring to a marble bust to improve the portrait later. The toga itself, however, was a puzzle. I had no trouble finding photos of statues as a reference. Looking at them, however, all I could think was, “what do all those folds and pleats *mean*?” The few diagrams I found that described how to fold a toga were of some help, but I am still unsatisfied about a point or two. You may be surprised that the Emperor isn’t wearing sandals. But, unless he were at home, a man in a toga would most likely wear a fully enclosed shoe. Footwear, like much of Roman culture, signified status. A man of the senatorial class must wear a red shoe in public, and not show his hairy old toes. Sandals *were* proper wear for the home, though. In fact, polite folk had their sandals brought along by their servants when they attended a dinner party.

Perhaps I should have researched the interior of Vespasian’s palace a little more thoroughly than I did, but I think it’s in the proper spirit.

And there is Saara, wearing her common utility dress – an almost liquid film with brilliant mirror finish that is actually a hyperdimensional extension of the hull of her starship, and links her to all the power and capabilities of an inconceivably sophisticated faster-than-light vehicle. It beats a lousy DeLorean as a time-machine, also. The “shawl” is purely decorative, worn to add a dash of colour. It derives from a larger garment that resembles a poncho or serape. Something bright, I should think. Florid pink with gold and red trim, perhaps? The clasp might be gold also, with amber “wings.”

I imagine I’d be wearing something similar. In all honesty, if that were the case, I wouldn’t need Saara’s protection – with all the power of that starship behind me, I’d be quite capable of looking after myself. But traveling is far more fun with a friend, don’t you think? It’s all fantasy, anyway.

That’s why this unrecorded visit to the first century AD hasn’t rewritten the entire future, and why you are reading about it in a fanzine rather than a history book.

Ah, but I can daydream, can’t I?

“Dear Me! I must be turning into a God.” – Emperor Vespasian on his death bed.

SCREWY SCROLLS FOR REVIEW

I find there are two kinds of books published by academics.

One, very common, is written as if the other academics are looking over their shoulder.

For example, *"1177 B.C. The Year Civilization Collapsed"* by Eric H. Cline. It's all about the collapse of Bronze Age civilization at the hands of the Sea Peoples. Or not.

Maybe the city state of Ugarit was looted and destroyed by the Sea Peoples, or maybe it just burned down, or maybe it was attacked by its neighbours or maybe it fell because of an eternal revolt or maybe... nothing at all happened and people just moved away for some reason.

The author treats all "evidence" this way. He's afraid to draw any conclusions. Maybe, apart from the assault on Egypt, there was NO Sea People invasion. Maybe they didn't exist.

The author draws NO conclusions from more than a century of archaeology. It's as if he's afraid he'll be attacked by his peers for concluding anything. He presents history as a series of multiple choice options. In effect, implying that archaeology is one of the most useless of sciences. Generally speaking, in science, you come up with a theory based on evidence. This he refuses to do. A gigantic disappointment.

The other type of academic book is written to acquaint the readers with the author's best guess as to what actually happened.

James Romm, for instance, in his *"Dying Every Day; Seneca at the Court of Nero,"* after a great deal of research comes up with a "theory" of what actually went on between Seneca and Nero and presents a very readable narrative based on his opinionated subjective interpretation of the evidence. It may not be absolute "truth" but it is definitely informed speculation that appears entirely credible. Other historians may quibble. Eventually he may be proved wrong. But it's darn addictive reading, hard to put down, and an easy way to absorb a lot of the actual evidence pertaining to the era.

And Stephen Dando Collins, in his *"Legions of Rome; The Definitive History of Every Imperial Roman Legion"* has written the best book on the subject I've ever read. Not only can you follow the "life story" of each and every legion, the bulk of the book describes ALL of the major wars and battles of Imperial Rome in a coherent narrative that gives you a good feel for how the Legions evolved and why Rome fell. Wonderful book. A real treat.

So beware defensive books written by academics afraid for their reputation among their peers. Look for the books where the authors are prepared to go out on a limb and present their best theories regardless of what their peers may think. Oddly enough, the books by opinionated authors sharing their theories tend to be relatively free of "trade jargon" and reasonably well written, as opposed to the defensive sort whose authors use words to construct a shell around themselves, erecting barriers and walls as if to make themselves feel safe.

The best books, from a lay readers point of view, are often sneered at by academic critics for being "populist" as if it is a sin to flesh out bones and bring the past to life. These are the only books worth reading.

"There may be pleasure in the memory of even these events one day." – Virgil

MINI-MISSIVES AND MICRO-MONOGRAPHS

From: Eric Mayer – 26 January 2015

The Pleasure of Ruins gets off to a good start with that cover. The god of nightmares and insanity. Whoa! Not exactly a Christian concept. Is there even a Saint in charge of nightmares?

(The Graeme – There should be!)

Your icky gods article (speaking of icky gods) makes me wonder if Hollywood has ever come close to showing history realistically, encrusted with filth? So Cortez' men had pustules and running sores. Was he sure the stench in that enclosed room atop the pyramid was from the sacrifices that had been made there? Fascinating description, however. I wonder about the blood left everywhere. Did they ever clean up those holy abattoirs? In the Old Testament there's plenty of talk about sacrifices in the temple but nothing about temple cleaning rituals. (I may be totally wrong.) I seem to recall the priest goes into the holy of holies only once a year and sprinkles blood around. Aside from that no one ever enters, certainly not to clean, so presumably the blood stays there. Okay, so that's probably a stupid thing to ponder when reading the Bible.

(The Graeme – The dried blood is numinous of course. It would be sacrilegious to remove it. And in cultures where disease was viewed as the consequence of disobeying the gods, cleaning anything, including yourself or portions of yourself, was conducted for reasons of ritual purity rather than sanitation.

Hollywood has never come close to portraying the reality. Nor should it. People wouldn't believe it. Most tend to assume the past was much like today, only less sophisticated. That humanity was just as intelligent as today, but had a different take on behaviours and customs to the point of being quite alien, is something films can't take the time to illustrate. It would spoil the whole point of the "entertainment."

Take the recent film of "Troy" (I think that was the title) with Brad Pitt as Achilles. A lot of people hated it. A petulant, violent Achilles is not most people's concept of a hero. Not today, that is. But I love the film because it captures the Homeric concept of the ideal hero perfectly, better than any previous film. This makes for unpleasant viewing for many moderns.)

Quite the exchanges between Cicero and Mark Antony. Was that scurrilous political pamphlet really the work of Cicero? He must have thought Mark Antony was about to be removed from power, otherwise he was begging to be executed. Or was political discourse in those days such that one could normally get away with that sort of character assassination? i.e. was it as low as it today in the United States? Maybe we need to bring back some Roman virtues. I wouldn't mind seeing Rush Limbaugh's head with a spike through it.

(The Graeme – Virulent character assassination was standard in Roman court proceedings involving important government officials or wealthy individuals. The central idea, if you were acting for the prosecution, was to prove that the accused was such an incredibly loathsome and immoral individual that he should be found guilty on general principles, never mind any actual evidence (often considered irrelevant).

Defense counsel, on the other hand, usually sought to portray the accusers as veritable traitors calling the wonderful Roman order into disrepute through frivolous accusations against a truly outstanding citizen.

Much depended on what witnesses had to say, and they were usually cross examined in the most hostile manner imaginable.

In short, the dramatic aspects of courtroom proceedings, in major trials at least, went far beyond anything appearing in Perry Mason. The fact that the accused was a powerful patron (all the upper class bastards were) who could call upon dozens or even hundreds of "respected" citizens to lobby on their behalf up to and including loudly applauding anything and everything their counsel proclaimed in the courtroom, not to mention booing the opposing counsel, made for loud and dynamic courtroom proceedings which the judges tolerated, in the same sense that modern European-style football referees tolerate the predictable "I'm hurt! I'm hurt!" shenanigans designed to halt the momentum of the opposing team. All part of the game.

This is why courtroom proceedings were a spectator sport on a par with gladiator combat or chariot racing, at least in the minds of those addicted to it. It appealed to the public imagination. And for Senators like Cicero, enhanced their prestige and reputation with the general public as well as their peers.

Senate proceedings, at least in the days of the Republic, could be just as vituperative. Cicero set the standard. All agreed no one was better at advocacy (be it legal or political) as he. Though Caesar was considered the better orator in general public speaking terms.

The problem with Cicero is that he could never resist the opportunity to go for the zinger, even in private conversation. He prided himself on his wit. Caesar famously had Cicero quotes forwarded to him wherever he was slaughtering enemies of Rome. But sometimes, as in the case of Mark Antony (considered a reasonably good speaker but nothing noteworthy), resentment and humiliation resulted in revenge at the first opportunity. By Roman standards Antony was considered a bit of a spoilsport.)

Indeed, Cicero was arrogant. But how many men who imagine they will be remembered in a thousand years actually are? I'll bet this fanzine article would really piss him off though.

(The Graeme – Arrogant, but fragile. He continually worried about his legacy. And about the public's view of him. He was sort of like a modern parliamentarian who glories in his on-the-floor triumphs but gets a little confused by bureaucrats and businessmen outside parliament who create their own rules. He had difficulty coping with people who didn't play "the game" the way it was supposed to be played. The chaos of civil war was a particular nightmare for him. He could never make up his mind what to do. The consequences of mistakes in the "real world," as opposed to the floor of the Senate chamber, often reduced him to irresolution. Quite a few modern politicians are of the same mould.

Actually I think he would like the article. The very thought he was being discussed two millennia after his death would fill him with glee. If he had ever been presented with a time machine he would have travelled into the future decade by decade, century by century, for the sole purpose of finding out what people were saying about him. I guarantee it.)

For someone who loves history, I have read woefully little of it. The same could be said of literature of all varieties, from the classics to sf/fantasy and mysteries. I've spent my whole life reading but haven't made any inroads at all. I've given up embarking on reading plans. From experience I know that if I were to dedicate myself to a trek through Roman classics, practically before I got to the first mile marker I'd find myself wandering off to check out the temple of Flannery O'Connor or turning down Fifties Gold Medal crime Street.

(The Graeme – The sad truth is that the surviving classical literature varies greatly in quality, even from the narrow view of ease of reading. With some books it is easy to get bored. Poor translations can make things worse. I just skim read the classics soaking up the overall ambience and looking for the nifty bits. Which is pretty much the way I read everything, actually.)

You mention the Sacred Way from Athens to the temple of Demeter and Kore. As it happens Mary and I just last week finished our Byzantine mystery Murder in Megara. The book takes place in "Demeter country" albeit in the sixth century AD and a small ruined temple to the goddess features strongly. It will be out in October.

(The Graeme – There is one library in town which carries your books. I think I've read the first three in the series. I do intend to read them all as I quite enjoy them. I don't recommend Plato's writings for this zine's readers because I find most of Plato's ideas tedious and boring, but I recommend your novels! Great fun!)

From: Michael Addiego – 26 January 2015

Mr. Cameron, I really like what you wrote of in *The Pleasure of Ruins*. History is just as fascinating as SF. Give us more. Thanks.

(The Graeme – Thank you. I, too, find, ancient history endlessly fascinating, and often just as alien as many a SpecFic thought experiment. SF&F writers are notorious for mining the past to create the future. Good thing too. The two complement each other.)

From: Lloyd Penney – 28 January 2015

Well, I thought this was an experiment on your part to produce an archaeology zine. Did you think you'd produce a second issue of *The Pleasure of Ruins*? Maybe you did...

Most gods are icky. At least, they are painted as being noble and glorious by their followers, but when they show up and show their darker side, well, that's when they show us their ick. And then, just when the gods look icky, those darned Spaniards come along, and they are quantum icky. And then, the Aztecs with their bloody ceremonies... Between the gods and the mortals, who knows who to choose?

(The Graeme – Most people like to choose the winning side. Not always easy.)

The Romans' morals seems to waver like heat off pavement. Let's see what depravities we can convince ourselves into doing, and then doing well. As today, appearances are everything, and the Roman Senate had no business in the bedrooms of the Empire. Ah, perhaps there was more than the obvious meaning when Mrs. Caesar said, "Julie, don't go!"

(The Graeme – There was a time when Roman morals were strict and puritanical beyond belief, which I think was a product of overthrowing their Etruscan overlords and finding that as a result the power, wealth and prestige (not to mention standard of living) of Rome (which had been a major Etruscan trading centre) plummeted to rock bottom and stayed there for several weary, tiresome centuries until the early Republic got into the habit of expanding at their neighbour's expense and slowly accumulating resources and wealth.

By the late Republic the Romans were an awful lot like today's America, with a constant and very public battle between insanely strict puritanism and wild excess. Ultimately the increasing impoverishment of even the upper classes due to a declining economy (fewer and fewer people with any money at all as even the army moved toward a barter system) led to a world weariness where "excess" was frowned upon as a kind of treason out of keeping with the spirit of the times. Hence the attraction of Christianity and other mystery religions.

But even at the height of the empire they had no monopoly on decadence. The modern world has exceeded their standards of excess. Many ancient Romans would be quite at home in today's world. They'd enjoy it.)

One show we do enjoy on the provincial educational channel, TVOntario, is *Time Team*, the quite enjoyable archaeology programme hosted by Sir Tony Robinson, which was broadcast on Britain's Channel Four for 20 years. It's the right combination of interesting, informative and tongue-in-cheek.

(The Graeme – I think I've seen one or two episodes on cable TV. Quite enjoyed them. I'd like to see more genuine archaeology on TV. Much of what is shown nowadays is simplistic and misleading garbage.)

Done, I think I am. Many thanks, take care, see you with the next one, and I am sure there will be issue 3.

From: Dave Haren – 16 February 2015

Hi Graeme,

There's a character named Graham Hancock poking around the edges of the world looking for evidences of prehistoric ruins. Apparently there was a meteor or comet strike on the Ice pack over Canada which caused a catastrophic melt event and drown a good portion of the low lying earth. What he's trying to find is the ruins in those areas. Like Gobekli Tepe any find in those areas will require an extensive rewrite of all of the common wisdom.

(The Graeme – Well, yes and no. The Gobekli Tepe complex of mini-monoliths with totem-like carvings of animals on easily worked limestone (or whatever the rock was – easily carved at any rate) was the product of a pre-agricultural society gathering for ritual purposes to enhance the prestige of either the tribe, the tribe's elite, or both. That everything was deliberately buried only emphasizes the ritual nature of the site. Really a shamanistic exercise in sympathetic magic more than anything else, which just happened to be done in stone.

This sort of thing, along with wooden buildings exhibiting good carpentry skills, probably goes back further than we think, but almost all of it has not survived, or at least has not been found. Definitely some of the continental shelves were submerged in relatively recent times, and since the littoral regions of the past were undoubtedly well populated with hunter-gatherer types following abundant herds feeding on lush vegetation, underwater archaeology might uncover additional material that would add to our knowledge of prehistory.

But blow the lid of our preconceptions by unveiling relics of mighty civilizations? Nope. Not going to happen. Nothing of that sort has ever been found. Nor will be.)

Any time a whole cloth narrative is presented it should be viewed as majorly suspect. To me that is the value of ruins, in that you can use the evidence of what you see to debunk the seamless spin doctored version.

(The Graeme – That's a given in any science. You construct an understanding based on current evidence, but improve the understanding based on any new evidence which explains things better.)

From: Gregory Benford – 26 April 2015

Good to see a fmz on one of my fave hobbies, too--especially Greek & Mayan.

You might like my archeo novel, CHILLER...mostly based on my many visits there.

(The Graeme – Hope this issue is of interest. “Chiller” definitely sounds worth checking out.)

From: Rhea Rose – 08 August 2015

Now that I'm on summer holidays I've had time to read your two issues of The Pleasures of Ruins, love the title. I am really enjoying your take on ancient history (I love it too, but not so much that I will read a 600 page text). I really appreciate your take and time on gleaning the interesting stuff for us. *(The Graeme – Thank you!)*

“If any man cannot feel the power of God when he looks upon the stars, then I doubt whether he is capable of feeling anything at all.” – Cicero
