

## INTRODUCTION

*[NOTE TO THE READER: This is a work of **fiction**, from beginning to end. Nevertheless, I have tried to stay within the essential story of Caesar as it has come down to us. Where the historical record is in conflict, I have made choices. Where there are voids, I have filled some of them with scenes and dialogues that just may have occurred.]*

I was not surprised when the Headmaster called me into his office and told me that the Latin Department was shutting down. By this time I *was* the Latin Department. It had shrunk from a roster of five teachers to one in just a few years. First, Xavier had made the third and fourth years of Latin elective subjects. Then it dropped the requirement of Latin entirely for the first two years. Thus this “alien and useless language” would be studied only if a gaming-crazed fourteen-year-old somehow miraculously chose to do so. Hence I was on my way out after thirty-five years of teaching. No more would the words of Cicero, Caesar, Horace, Juvenal, Levy, Seneca, Virgil, Suetonius, Plutarch and the others be heard in the corridors of Xavier High School. Taken together with the disappearance of the cadet uniforms, it was no longer Xavier to me.

It was near the end of the school year so I did not have to endure the sympathy of my colleagues for very long. I decided to resign the day after my last class and go someplace where I could live comfortably on my pension and not have to think about the stupidity of modern educators.

It was easy to decide where to go. Having never married, and with most of my siblings gone, I was alone in making the decision. To Rome! Where Latin once ruled.

Hence I soon found myself in the Alban Hills, about twelve miles southwest of Rome, in a town called Frascati. This community was famous for the white wine named after it and for some scientific laboratories. But its real draw for me was the many old villas in the hills outside of town. One of them was called

Tuscalana, after the beloved villa of Cicero, Tusculum, and was situated at the highest point of an ancient volcanic ridge. Of course it bore no resemblance to what Cicero may have had, nor did anybody even pretend that it sat where Cicero's did.

This villa, like many others in the Alban Hills, was built during the Renaissance and housed a succession of cardinals, popes and other notables over the centuries. These men vacationed here and in scores of other villas, just as the ancient Roman nobles and wealthy had, to escape the heat and humidity of Rome. Lucien Bonaparte, who did the first excavations of the area, once occupied it. It turns out he was not very organized and simply sold what antiquities he found on the auction market in Rome to pay for his expenses. Many of those objects are now scattered around the museums of the world. But in his defense he was one of the first to do historical excavation in the nineteenth century and the discipline had not yet been developed.

Today the Villa Tuscalana is owned by the Salesians of Don Bosco and used principally as a retreat for aged priests and as a conference hotel. The Salesians, or the Order of St. Francis de Sales, had originally been founded by an Italian priest, Don Bosco, to help the poor that were being crushed in the Industrial Revolution. It still ministers to the poor around the world.

I could not resist the lure of the names "Tusculum" and "Don Bosco," nor the magnificent views from the garden of the villa. Cicero had written a famous philosophical discourse called *Conversations at Tusculum* (*Tusculanae disputationes*) and in it he incidentally describes, with loving care and affection, his own luxurious villa at Tusculum. As for "Don Bosco," two of my brothers as kids had gone to a summer camp called Camp Don Bosco and would often sing the Don Bosco camp song around the house: "Camp Don Bosco, Camp Don Bosco, Camp Don Bosco *w...a...y....*" I suspect many of our major decisions are based on even more flimsy grounds. At any rate I pestered the Fathers until they agreed to let me renovate a tiny ruined chapel far off in a corner of the gardens and live there at a modest rental.

Over the next few years I became accustomed to the leisurely pace of the other residents in the Alban Hills, often exploring the ancient ruins nearby, relying heavily on my walking stick and my inseparable companion, Gus. I had found Gus in a little cave, the lone surviving puppy of a mother who had apparently starved to death. I am not sure but I suspect he is a combination of a

miniature dachshund and a corgi.

Sometimes we did our exploring with one or more of the retired Salesians who lived in the villa itself. I had become acquainted with some of them while using their wonderful library, which had an excellent collection of books in Latin. I eventually learned that some of the Salesians were as addicted as I was to the Latin language and we would often discuss the texts of the ancients.

I had resigned myself, without realizing it, to this kind of quiet but pleasant existence for the remainder of my years.

Then one day an accident suffered by Gus propelled me into a new life. We had been exploring some unremarkable ruins in an isolated and uninhabited wood a few miles east of the villa when I suddenly realized that Gus had disappeared. I called out for him repeatedly and must have searched around endless ancient columns and marble crevices for hours. Finally I decided to return to the spot where I last remembered seeing him. I sat down on the lower marble step of what must have been an entranceway to some building and just looked around. After some time I noticed a particularly dark space along a low stone wall only about twenty feet from me.

Sure enough, upon inspection this dark area revealed an opening in the wall. I got down on my knees and tried to peer into the hole. I could not see anything but I felt a slight disturbance in the air to suggest that just inside the opening there must be a deep drop. I put my head into the opening and called out for Gus. My heart took a leap of joy when I heard a responding bark echoing in the emptiness.

Fortunately I always carried with me some climbing rope, along with an ax, a pick, and a small flashlight. I sometimes used them to explore interesting caves that we would come across. Even though the area was famous for its villas, from ancient Roman days to today, there still was evidence of the caves that people inhabited in even earlier times. Though this deep opening presented more than the usual challenge, there was no way I was going to leave Gus. I first widened the opening by removing some adjacent stones. Then I tied one end of the rope securely around a nearby column and very slowly lowered myself into the dark opening. Though I could see nothing as I descended I could hear Gus's barking getting louder until I was finally down on solid ground next to him. It turned out that the descent was no more than twenty or twenty-five feet down. We of course were delighted to see each other again, but I had to sit down and rest a while before trying to climb up with Gus.

I clicked on my little flashlight and looked around. I immediately noticed a number of large objects in what appeared to be a large room. I determined that they were trunks or chests of some kind. The trunks seemed to be made of very hard wood and each contained a lid that was tightly fastened by several metal rods. The chests were very heavy. I could not even budge one of them.

Naturally I was excited by the discovery. A host of possibilities about what I had found— or rather what Gus had found—in this ancient land ignited my imagination. But there was little I could do by myself with what tools I had at hand. I would have to go for help.

I was now anxious to be back up in the light of day with Gus and get back to the villa. With such energy that I did not know I had, I was able to scale up the wall with Gus under one arm and soon we were both seated on the ground outside the opening, me panting heavily and Gus running around in joy. That very afternoon when I got back to the villa I searched around for some help and soon found it in the library. Four of the Fathers that I had become close to were there.

I described to them what I had found, and we sat around and discussed the best way to proceed. The youngest among us was Giovanni, who was in his early fifties and strong as an ox. He was all for going after the “treasure” immediately. But it was our oldest companion, Leo, who got us to settle down and think through it all, step by step.

Being Italian and having headed some of the Salesian organizations in Italy for a number of years, he had a deep understanding of how things were done in Italy. He pointed out that by law such a find would have to be reported immediately to the Ministry of Culture in Rome.

Even though none of us had had his experience, we all knew just enough about Italian government agencies to let out a chorus of groans. However, being priests and brothers, and used to obeying a higher authority, they all decided, and I readily agreed, that we could for the time being ignore the law. We all knew that once the government got involved, a cloak of secrecy would descend on the discovery while behind the scenes the different bureaucracies would battle over who would be “in charge,” where the contents would be studied, who would make the announcement, where they would get the financing, and so forth and so on, for so long that we would all have been long been dead and buried before anything happened.

Once that was out of the way we similarly dismissed any idea of informing

the head of the villa, much less the head of the Order. They were not as free as we were to be so cavalier about the law.

We also quickly put aside the question of what to do with our discovery until we could determine just what it was. Chests full of gold would mean one thing and require a certain course. If they contained objects of art, then another path. If they were ancient clothing and cooking utensils, then another. If documents, yet a different direction. So rather than waste time in speculative debate, we concentrated on the practical problem of getting the chests out of the cave to a location in the villa where we could study the contents. We easily agreed that we would tell no one else until we determined what we had, since even a whisper of such a find in this part of the world would have treasure-hunters, government officials, the police, and God knew who else coming down on us like an avalanche.

We visited the site the very next day, this time equipped with ladders, some tools, and heavy flashlights. We had borrowed the gardener's pickup truck for our venture. We made the hole wider and descended to the floor.

It appeared that the chamber had been carved out of rock and was about the size of a modest living room. In it were five trunks made of solid wood, each one identical. The trunks had not been locked, but only tightly secured with iron bars. Around the rim of each trunk where the lid met the base someone had been glued very thick layers of two different types of substances, which we later identified as cork and asbestos, materials that the ancients often used for insulation. With some lubricants and a lot of chipping away we finally opened the first trunk. Even before we could gaze on what it contained we were assaulted with a strange and very strong odor. At first we almost panicked, thinking it might have been a trap set by the ancients, and that we would all soon collapse from some strange poison.

When nothing else happened and no one fainted or died, we looked into the trunk and saw dozens and dozens of what appeared to be small and narrow canvas bags neatly piled up, one on top of the other, in orderly stacks. We needed to examine what the bags contained, but decided to do it in the privacy of my cottage. Since the trunks themselves were too large and too heavy for us to remove, we would have to carry the canvas bags in our arms up the ladder.

It took us about a week to retrieve, carefully and in secrecy, all the little bags from that extraordinary cave. There were several hundred of them. But on the

very first day we learned that we had come upon the dream of a scholar's life.

Each of those bags, as we first called them, was in fact a heavy parchment in which was wrapped a roll of papyrus, or a scroll. Most of the scrolls, when fully unfolded, were about fifteen or twenty feet long, consisting of a series of nine by thirteen inch sheets glued together one after another. We had all seen papyrus scrolls before, but no one could remember seeing papyrus of such fine quality. The scrolls were covered with columns of small but neat writing in Latin.

This was more than we could handle. Now, as they say, it was getting serious. So we meekly went up to the office of the villa's leader and told the good Father what we had found.

He quickly came over to my now very crowded cottage and examined some of the scrolls. Then he sat down heavily and seemed to lose himself in thought. We anxiously awaited his verdict.

"Well," he finally said, "get these precious things up to our library and let's start work on them."

The catch was duly transferred into the library and it became the center of our lives for the next few years. We determined that the parchment scrolls contained the notes and research of Gaius Asinius Pollio, a contemporary of Julius Caesar's, which he apparently had used to produce his seventeen-volume *History of the Civil War*, which covered the conflict in Rome from 60 to 42 BC.

Pollio had been a loyal supporter of Caesar's, serving as an officer in his army and fighting under him from the beginning to the end of the civil war. Thereafter he had kept his distance from Augustus, but was allowed to live in peace. He became famous as an orator and patron of the arts. Horace and Virgil were among his beneficiaries. He has come down to us as an often-quoted historian of the period, but an historian whose works, sadly including those seventeen volumes on the Roman civil war, have been lost to posterity. Much of his writing was done at his country villa in, yes, Tusculum. It seems that after Cicero's death Pollio somehow came into possession of the great orator's villa.

One of the Salesian Brothers was very experienced in carpentry. He made a careful examination of the trunks and quietly consulted with some experts in Rome. He found that the trunks were ingeniously constructed storage containers, using some of the hardest woods known in the ancient world, probably imported from Africa. In combination with layers of densely packed cork and asbestos as well as a half-inch sheets of steel, the containers had for two thousand years kept

insects, moisture, and even the air itself, away from the scrolls. That explained why the scrolls were as pliable and easy to handle as if they had just been written upon.

Another Brother spent much time examining the few gold coins we had found in each trunk, something that at first struck us as curious. After much research he came across pictures of them in a coin book at the Vatican Library, which explained the figures and cryptic letters on the coins. The coins bore the head and name of Emperor Flavius Honorius Augustus, who reigned as Emperor of the Western Roman Empire from 395 to 423 AD, residing mostly in Ravenna, where the Western capital of the empire had retreated under pressure from the invading barbarians.

We could only speculate what all this meant. But we eventually did come to a consensus, as amateur archeologists, that the descendants of Asinius Pollio decided sometime during the reign of Honorius to preserve their famous ancestor's works for prosperity, though their world was falling apart around them and they themselves might not survive much longer. So they constructed these special trunks and deposited Pollio's books and records in them. Since we had only his notes, and certainly not all of them, this meant that Gus and I had stumbled across only a fraction of the trunks they must have buried in the hills to escape the rampaging barbarians. The coins told us that these trunks were hidden here most probably around 410 AD, when Alaric I and the Visigoths sacked and burned Rome.

The Salesian Fathers are compiling a complete copy of Pollio's notes and will publish them with extensive commentary. It is a guaranteed blockbuster. All the proceeds beyond expenses will go to their work with the poor. The Salesians are confident that when the inevitable explosion occurs upon publication, they can escape any legal entanglements by simply claiming that the scrolls had been in the basement of the villa all this time. Such a claim would be transparently absurd to everybody. But the Church still had some power in Italy and the government of the day was as weak as usual and its leaders would be glad for any excuse to avoid a confrontation with the Church.

I myself am using Pollio's notes to write this story, focused primarily on Julius Caesar. My book will be published in conjunction with the work of the Salesian Fathers. As I am well beyond the September of my years, and am a bit weary after the long and difficult study of Pollio's notes, I readily agreed that the

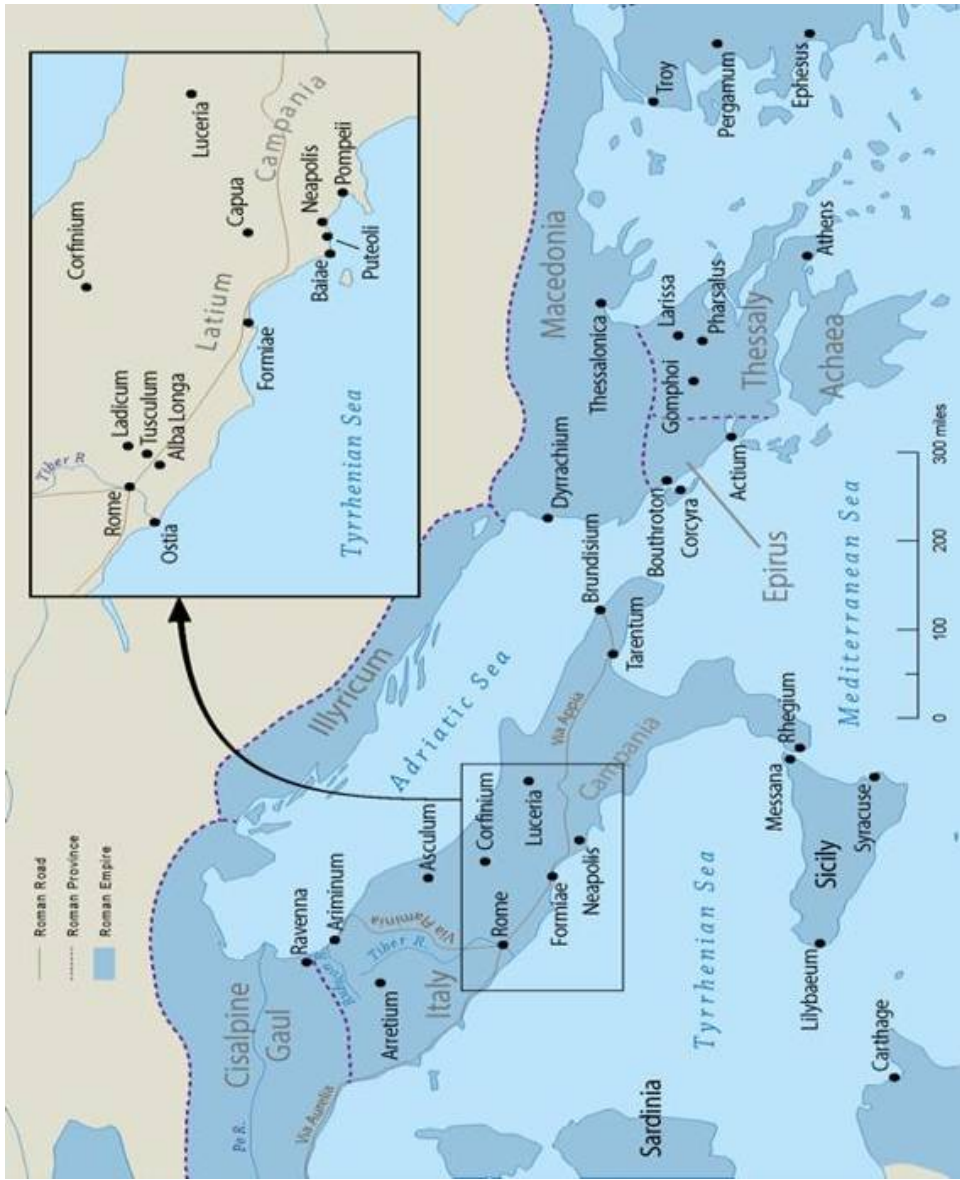
net proceeds, after funding a trust for Gus, will also go to the Salesians' work with Pope Francis's poor.

Arthur Paone  
Villa Tuscalana in the Alban Hills



## **MAPS**

### **ITALY AND GREECE**



## **PART I**

**ROME, Capital of the Roman Republic, 82 – 57 BC**

## **PART II**

**ALEXANDRIA, Capital of Egypt, 48 BC**

## **PART III**

### **The Republic and Beyond**

## **PART IV**

**ROME, 47 – 44 BC**

## **EPILOGUE**

## **APPENDIX**