

LOST SCROLLS OF ARCHIMEDES

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This book is dedicated to my loving wife, Charlotte Cheney; my supportive children, Melissa and Andrew; my parents, Tom and Vicki Roberts; and Dudley, faithful companion and best dog ever.

“The only thing new in the world is the history you do not know.”
Harry S. Truman

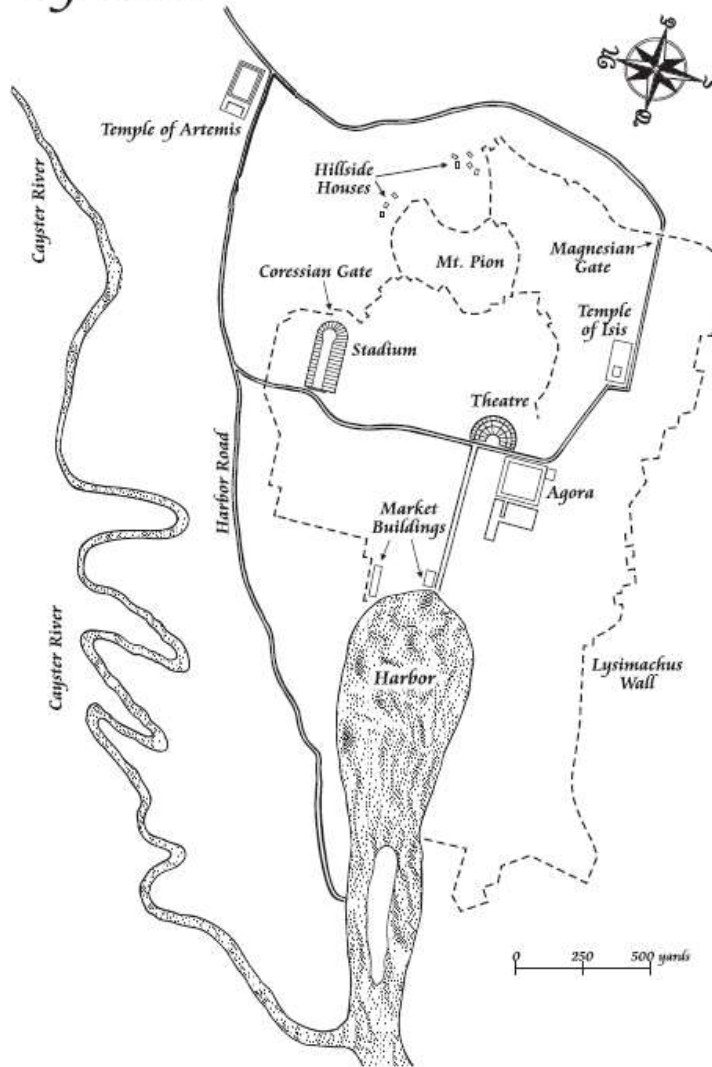
**THE ROMAN REPUBLIC
AT THE DEATH OF CAESAR 44 B.C**

- Roman Empire
- States Dependent on Rome





Ephesus



38 B.C.

CHAPTER ONE

Marcus
Ephesus, August 5

Marcus Bassus gripped the side of the skiff and stared at the dark river. Its placid surface reflected the half-moon's light while masking the turbulent undercurrents far below.

"We must jump *now*, Marcus." Hippolytus said.

Despite the warm night air, Marcus shivered as he studied the shrouded shore fifty feet beyond the boat. The lost artifacts they sought tonight hid potent and mysterious dangers. Despite the risk to his life if he was caught, he heeded their siren call.

But I'm a scholar, not a thief.

He took a deep breath and glanced at his mentor standing in the bow. Like Marcus, Hippolytus was stripped to his loincloth, his skin blackened with ashes and pig fat.

For the third time, the small boat neared the eastern shore of the Cayster River north of the city of Ephesus in the Roman province of Asia. At the earlier locations where they sought to disembark, rocks, fallen trees, and tricky currents made the approach too dangerous. They were behind schedule.

Water splashed as Julianus, their local guide, rowed to keep the bow pointed into the swift current. Moonlight glinted off a medallion peeking above his tunic. The same Oracle medallion hung from Hippolytus's neck.

"Come on, boy," Julianus urged. His mangled nose lent a nasal tone to his voice. "This is damned hard work."

Marcus had met the man only yesterday. Julianus, whose muscled arms bulged as he heaved at the oars, said little beyond reporting the local conditions. Hippolytus said the man was obtuse, even for an Oracle.

Turning to the water, Marcus sought to calm his fears, reminding himself he often swam across the great Nile River canal in Alexandria. Still, the unknowns ahead fueled his anxiety.

"Did you hear me?" Hippolytus urged, pointing his finger at Marcus. "It's time."

Pulse racing, Marcus scooped his leather bag off the bottom boards and flung it over his back before rolling over the boat's side. He gasped as the icy water shocked him. His darkened skin blended with the inky river, and he swam against the current until Hippolytus joined him. Hippolytus waved to Julianus, who then maneuvered the skiff downstream toward the harbor at Ephesus.

With long frog strokes, Marcus swam alongside Hippolytus toward the ominous shore, where he feared soldiers waited to hack him to pieces. Soon enough his feet touched the rough river bottom, and the two invaders crawled through the shallows to a narrow strip of beach.

He scurried across the sand into the shadows of the muddy embankment. With each step, he expected an arrow from an Amazon huntress, the sworn protector of the goddess Artemis. His heart pounded in his ears, drowning out the river's soft moan. He tripped on a tree root but reached the bank and surveyed the marsh ahead. Neither sound nor motion reached his senses. His heartbeat slowed.

The serenity of the celestial glow only deepened his sense that a dark destiny was hanging over the river and land. Ahead lay the path to the Temple of Artemis, a destination for thousands of religious pilgrims. To the right, a mere mile away, the lights of Ephesus shimmered.

Marcus extracted a rope and grapnel from his bag handing it to Hippolytus, who coiled the rope over his shoulder.

Hippolytus examined the iron claws. "You sharpened these?"

"Yes," Marcus said, keeping his voice low, "before you got up this morning." In the dark, he made a sour face, recalling the effort to wake himself at such an unaccustomed hour.

In his scouting report, Julianus said one hundred priests and servants slept in the building, while scores of armed men guarded the temple's vast riches of art, gold, and sacred writings day and night.

The temple's sixty-foot height worried Marcus; that was near his tutor's limit for tossing the grappling hook.

To the southeast, lights burned at a few of the houses crowding the slopes of Mount Pion. Atop the mountain, the city walls loomed. At this distance, Marcus thanked Fortuna that he'd be invisible to the soldiers walking their rounds on the massive fortifications.

"Let's go." With his body bent low, Hippolytus darted into the reeds. Though well up in age, Marcus had observed his mentor at the Gymnasium in Alexandria. The man still retained some of the vigor from his youth as a champion athlete.

The dry reeds and cattails chafed his bare legs as Marcus followed his mentor. Beyond, he glimpsed the silhouette of the looming stadium—now empty—standing midway between the swamp and Ephesus. Julianus reported that in April, the holy month of Artemision, the stadium and city had teemed with people.

Halfway across the field, Hippolytus mouthed a fierce whisper. "Horse patrol."

They dove into the mud. Hoofbeats thudded on the soft ground, and as they grew louder and closer, the smell of horseflesh mixed with the earthy scent of decaying grass. Mud smeared his lips when he pressed his body deeper into the wet ground.

The rider gave a low order, halting his horse. A palpable silence set in, and time slowed to a crawl.

Then a horse snorted, and the clapping of hooves resumed, receding into the distance.

Several minutes passed before Hippolytus whispered new orders. "We need to move a little to the south."

Marcus wiped the bitter mud from his mouth. "That will take more time. And what about those houses near the marsh edge?" At least those houses were unlit.

"It's that or capture." Hippolytus started off into the reeds.

Marcus moved in behind his tutor, and they crept south.

As they sneaked along, the door of one house creaked open. They dropped to the ground again. Marcus heard splashing and a deep sigh of relief.

After several moments, he raised his head and stared at his face reflected in a moonlit puddle. Like his skin, his blue eyes and sandy hair were black and murky. He ducked when the door creaked again.

His mentor resumed a crouch. “He’s gone. This way.”

More time lost. We must meet the merchant galley before dawn breaks.

Soon, Marcus spotted the planned hiding spot—a dense thicket at the end of the swamp. Fifty feet of open ground lay between the thicket and the temple. They moved in, using the last of the tall grass as cover. This close, Marcus marveled at the temple’s massive size. Walls of white marble towered over the muddy plain. Imposing columns ringed the building and supported the wooden roof he needed to climb up to. Under the pale moon, the glistening temple’s beauty rivaled that of any in Alexandria. The wildness of the Ephesian landscape stood in sharp contrast to the pristine streets and manicured gardens of his city.

Large contingents of guards covered the entrances and circled the sanctuary. For half an hour, the two soon-to-be-thieves watched the perimeter patrols, and as soon as the largest gap in the defenders reappeared, Hippolytus ordered him forward.

After motioning Marcus to a safe spot several paces away, Hippolytus took a position near the building where he could spin the grapple with plenty of speed. He picked up a handful of dirt, rubbed his palms together, and then retrieved the grapnel.

Hippolytus grunted as he whirled the grappling hook in large, lazy circles before sending the iron flying toward the roof, where it landed with a dull clink. When he tugged the rope, the spikes didn’t bite. He dodged the plummeting grapnel, and it struck the soft dirt with a thud that breached the quiet.

Marcus’s lips were parched, and the dried mud made his skin itch. Waves of nausea rolled through his empty stomach.

I hope the Oracles’ motives are pure. Temples are sacred.

While Marcus kept a sharp eye out for movement on the patrol path, Hippolytus recoiled the line. His tutor nodded at him before spinning the iron claws and releasing again.

Success.

With a tug on the rope, Hippolytus secured the grappling iron. Marcus blew a breath of relief.

It was his turn. Ignoring his conscience, he first confirmed that his short knife lay inside his leather bag before securing it across his body.

He grabbed the dangling line and started his climb, using the side of a column for support. As he ascended, he paused every few steps to take up several feet of free rope and coil it over one shoulder. The climbing practice at the Gymnasium back home was proving useful.

As he neared the roofline, Hippolytus’s warbling call of a nightjar startled Marcus. Guard approaching. Several loops of rope slipped off his shoulder, leaving the end dangling thirty feet above the ground. With luck, it was too high for the guard to notice. Marcus pressed his forehead against the rope.

Back in Alexandria, I’d be sleeping or reading a scroll I had sneaked out of the Library. Tonight, I’m dangling from a temple roof. But I wanted this opportunity, right?

Marcus controlled his breathing as he watched the sentry fade into the night. Then he resumed his climb and stepped onto the roof. Soon, his heart calmed, and he gave an owl’s call to Hippolytus. Marcus unsheathed his knife, dug the metal claws from the wood, and coiled the line.

Near the roof’s peak, he located one of many stone-ringed vents that let out the smoke from fires and incense. A full-grown man wouldn’t fit through, but a skinny, rope-climbing boy could.

Doubts crept into his mind.

Should I violate a temple? Will the Goddess be angry and seek vengeance?

Theft from a temple violated the gods, his father said, but Hippolytus promised a part in studying the significant scrolls stored there. His unquenchable thirst for the hidden knowledge of the ancient Greeks was the real reason for his willingness to be a lawbreaker. He hoped the Goddess understood.

Though the opening seemed to grow smaller with each passing moment, he knew the dark was playing tricks on him. He secured the grapnel near the vent and after seeing only darkness below, fed the line into the gloomy interior. Wishing he had more pig fat to ease his entry, he squirmed feet-first through the opening, sliding through the vent and between the roof timbers. He kept a firm grasp on the rope as he swayed high above the temple floor.

Amazed at his success in negotiating the vent, Marcus took his first look below his dangling feet. Marble columns surrounded an open space for animal sacrifices. Near the front, a single brazier cast the guards' flickering silhouettes against the walls. From his vantage point, the statue of the goddess Artemis seemed small and insignificant.

With smoke and incense filling his nostrils, he began a cautious descent toward the stone floor, slipping down alongside the many-breasted mother-goddess that now dwarfed him. His feet silently hit the marble tiles, and he crept toward the back wall of the room, using the monument and the forest of interior columns to shield against the men guarding the front entrance. In the blackness, his fingers became his eyes, searching for a mosaic panel. He found its raised edge, waist-high, and followed it to one of its ends.

That's it. Now to find the release lever.

Julianus said the mosaic contained over one hundred tiles across its width.

Gods, don't make me check each one.

He worked back toward the mosaic's middle, pressing on each small tile piece. Halfway across, none had given way.

Marcus clenched his jaws. With his finger poised to check the next tile, he heard laughter from the front. He froze and waited. A long moment passed before he resumed the search, punching each small chip one by one.

Near the mosaic's far end, one tile moved inward. Marcus flinched as the sharp click shattered the quiet, but he saw no movement from the guards.

At last.

Marcus pressed a shoulder against the wall, and the slab of stone opened a finger's width. With a harder push, it moved inward, rotating soundlessly on a central pivot.

His skin crawled as he envisioned the dangers—pits with sharpened stakes, caltrops, an endless maze—awaiting him on the other side of the black, narrow opening. He summoned his courage and slipped through the gap in the wall.

Inside the lightless abyss, he reached out into the surrounding emptiness. His fingertips struck a low ceiling and strafed along rough-hewed walls. His toes sunk into a sandy floor. Hunched over, he took small steps into the black depth of the hollowed-out void within the structure of the temple. His leg muscles tightened as his fear of entombment surged.

A slight flow of air tickled the top of his head, and he probed upward, finding emptiness. He stretched out his back in relief, inhaling the fresh air.

Far above him, a dim orb of light glowed. He traced the rough outline of a small round hole, a shaft too narrow to hold the chest containing the scrolls. He moved deeper into the stone passage.

His bare shins slammed into hard metal. He hissed in pain and fell to his knees. In front of him, he reached out and encountered metal.

Could this be it?

A rush of excitement surged through every muscle.

He caressed the cold, dusty metal, recognizing it as a chest. For a moment, his breath came in ragged gasps. When his probing fingers found the latch, he paused before unhooking it. He struggled with the stiff lid and winced as the hinges screeched.

Something slithered against his leg.

He stiffened.

His eyes shifted, hunting.

In the shaft's dim light, a faint line moved through the sand. It grew, disappearing at a snail's pace into a wall crevice. Marcus eased out the air burning his lungs and thanked the gods for sparing him a snakebite. He tried the lid again.

It opened.

Yes.

Marcus groped around inside the chest. His hands found only a single item—a small leather-bound cylinder secured with straps. Couriers favored such cases to carry documents. His heart raced as he worked to untie it. Once opened, he probed the contents. The strong smell of papyrus filled his nostrils. An excited yell formed in his throat before he stifled it with a hand over his mouth. If the guards heard him, he was a dead man.

He gripped the two scrolls and savored the moment. Hippolytus vowed the secret Oracles organization followed the path to truth. Euphoria flooded his veins, and he struggled to contain his excitement. Planned for months, the adventure yielded him the Archimedes scrolls—Hippolytus will be proud of him.

Marcus peered up the shaft. Dawn grew close, so he pushed the scrolls back into the case, refastened its straps, and secured the cylinder into his leather bag. A king's treasure might surround him, but he had what he wanted. It was time to get out before the room became his tomb.

He retraced his steps and slipped out of the entrance, clutching his plunder to his chest. He stayed low and stole back to the dangling line. Under the disapproving stare of Artemis, he ascended the rope, hand over hand.

Back on the roof, he pulled the rope up from the vent, coiling it for the descent. He rubbed his chafed palms together; what he would give for a soothing ointment.

With great caution, he stepped to the edge, listening for the patrol. Again, he gave his owl call. When Hippolytus returned the all-clear signal, Marcus pressed his heel on the grapnel, securing it into the wood. He then slid down the rope, his feet touching solid ground in seconds. He shook his hands, wincing at his rope burns before dashing over to the thicket where Hippolytus waited.

“Do you have it?” Hippolytus whispered when Marcus squatted next to him.

“I promised I wouldn't fail you.” Despite the dark, he could see the grin on Hippolytus's face.

“Oh, Marcus, you're one magnificent boy.” His mentor's voice trembled with emotion as he slapped Marcus on the shoulder. “I'll hug you later.”

Marcus smiled, and his chest filled with pride, but he knew the celebration would have to wait. The patrol could appear at any moment.

Hippolytus ordered an immediate retreat south toward the stone-paved harbor road. Two miles away, at the isolated western end of the harbor, they'd find Julianus.

Marcus's shoulders relaxed. Success was theirs.

His optimism dissolved when he exited the underbrush and spotted three men entering the road from around the temple's far corner. One of them carried a torch, another a bow on his shoulder; their path took them down the harbor road—the same direction he and Hippolytus planned to follow.

“Back,” Hippolytus ordered in a harsh whisper.

Marcus scooted back into hiding, his leg muscles tightening once again. “Why are they here?” His voice cracked. “Did they see the rope? It will be light soon. Are we—?”

“Enough, Marcus. They're not dressed as guards. Let me think.” Hippolytus peeked out toward the road. “Here's the plan. I'll let them see me, and, assuming they chase me, I'll take the main road through town. I'll lose them in some alley and meet you at the boat. You take the harbor road as planned.”

Marcus's heart sank as he watched his mentor leave their cover. He took several deep breaths to calm himself.

When Hippolytus reached the road, he turned onto it and set a swift pace toward Ephesus. At first, no reaction came from the strangers.

“Stop, you. Stop.” The shout from the men behind Hippolytus was in Greek, but the accent wasn't native. Roman? Dread sent a shiver down Marcus's spine. These were not city guards.

He heard Hippolytus's pace quicken, breaking into a sprint. Marcus knew they were unlikely to catch him.

Marcus waited in the thicket. He needed the men to be far down the road since he intended to go in the same direction, at least for a short stretch.

His thoughts turned to Hippolytus's escape. When the primary avenue to Ephesus branched off to the south, Hippolytus would take it and lose his pursuers in the streets and alleys.

Marcus emerged from hiding, darted to the road, and took off. Between his brisk pace and the fear of capture, his heart pounded against his chest, seeking escape.

A few minutes later, he reached a fork in the road. The main avenue to Ephesus branched left where Hippolytus would have taken his pursuers. Though the road provided a faster way to Julianus and the boat, it touched the outskirts of the town. Relief swept through him on seeing that the taverns and shops at the intersection lay quiet and devoid of people, and he whipped right toward the harbor's western end. His tense body relaxed, shifting his manic pace into a rhythm he could sustain for the next two miles.

In the gloom, Marcus searched for his path to the beach. When he found it, he cut left and dashed down the sandy trail that sliced through a mass of shoulder-height bushes.

At the river's edge, he scanned for the signal light of Julianus, who waited with the skiff. In the nerve-racking quiet, he fidgeted with the bulla around his neck, the modest gold locket of a freeborn Roman child. It served to ward off evil; he hoped it worked tonight.

Marcus expected Julianus to have the boat ready. He envisioned the men wandering around town looking for a crazy man in a loincloth. He suppressed the laugh the image invoked and continued to search along the harbor. A shape moved toward him.

“Julianus?” Marcus's voice was only a whisper. *Where is the lamp?*

“Over here,” came the response.

He spotted a dim glow and moved in its direction.

“Did you get the scrolls?” The tall, thin figure of Julianus appeared.

“You have a boat?” Marcus posed in jest. As he approached Julianus, the man's bronze medallion shimmered in the dim lamp. “I have them.”

“That’s great, Marcus.” Julianus pointed off to the left. “The boat’s over here. Where’s Hippolytus?”

Marcus filled him in on the improvised escape plan to elude the pursuers. In the lamplight, he thought he saw concern cross the other man’s face.

Julianus stared skyward before focusing on Marcus. “We need to reach the mouth of the Cayster before daybreak to ensure our escape. The merchant ship won’t wait.”

“I know, but I am not leaving Hippolytus. You take the scrolls.”

Julianus’s face appeared placid, a sea of calm. “I’m sure he’ll show. Let’s wait by the boat. Follow me.”

Silently crossing fifty paces through the sand, the two men reached the beached skiff. Julianus turned up the lamp and set it on the sand. Marcus glanced eastward along the shore. His apprehension rose when he saw a pink tinge lighting the horizon. He pulled at his hair.

Patience.

“How old are you, Marcus?” asked Julianus.

“Fourteen.”

“Ah. Tell me, why are these scrolls important to you?”

Marcus thought for a moment. Hippolytus had agreed to let Marcus help decode the scrolls, but what did they mean for him? “They contain undiscovered, perhaps dangerous, knowledge from the ancient Greeks—Archimedes to be precise. As a scholar, studying them would be the chance of a lifetime.” Marcus had stolen the scrolls for the Oracles and trusted Hippolytus not to lead him astray.

A distant shout interrupted Marcus, and he turned to Julianus. “Someone’s coming.”

He peered down the shore toward Ephesus. Before long, he spotted torchlight, and the silhouette of a running man soon appeared against the lightening sky.

Marcus watched the runner close in on their position. “Those Romans are still chasing Hippolytus. Let’s move.” Marcus and Julianus shoved the boat toward the river.

As the bow hit the water, Hippolytus came running out of the night, breathless.

“Get in the boat!” yelled Julianus, the earlier calm fleeing his voice like prey before the hunter.

Marcus boarded before turning to Hippolytus. His tutor’s exhaustion forced Marcus to drag him over the side. He crumpled to the floor, breathing fast, eyes closed. The stamina of the champion athlete deserted his mentor hand in hand with his youth.

With a final push, Julianus got the stern into the river.

Marcus heard the ominous whistle of an arrow before he saw it hit Julianus’s leg. The man cried in pain as he grabbed the shaft buried in the back of his thigh. No longer able to hold on to the boat, Julianus lost his balance and collapsed into the water.

The current pushed the skiff rapidly downriver. Frantic, Marcus rushed to get the oars into the locks, working them to turn the vessel. He peered over his shoulder and saw Julianus regain his footing. As Julianus clutched the arrow’s shaft and limped toward the boat, Marcus rowed with the full measure of his strength to close the gap between them.

Another arrow tore through the air near Julianus’s head. He crouched and yelled at Marcus. “Go while you can! I’ll lead these fools away.” He dragged himself through the water toward shore.

“Julianus, no!” Marcus yelled, but it was too late.

Marcus ceased the vain effort to row upstream and let the boat drift. He pounded the skiff's side, tears welling in his eyes. His heart ached for his companion though he'd known him only a day.

About the Author

Tom Roberts is the author of an historical novel and a short story collection. At the Florida Writers Association's 2019 Royal Palm Literary Awards, his historical novel, *Lost Scrolls of Archimedes*, was awarded Gold for best unpublished historical novel. A software engineer in a previous life, Mr. Roberts began writing in 2017. He is avid reader of ancient history and technology and a member of the Florida Writers Association, the Atlanta Writers Club, and the West Florida Literary Federation. His favorite authors are Bernard Cornwell, Patrick O'Brian, Steven Saylor, and Arthur C. Clarke. An Air Force veteran, he loves dogs and enjoys hiking, classical music, video games, and college sports. He lives with his wife in Pensacola, Florida.

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