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ROME THROUGH ROMAN EYES

WALK ONE

SCIPIO • CICERO • ARCHIMEDES • ANTIKYTHERA

Professional Reading Copy

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Don Fenton, August 7, 2026

Preface

I have been walking toward Rome most of my life.

The walk began in the local library by the Ganaraska River. A boy sits at a desk, slowly turning the pages of a heavy book. He begins to lip-read the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh: He who saw the deep, the regions of the world, saw everything.

The boy thinks. Can he find Sumer on the map?

He points. The librarian takes down a book about hieroglyphics. He ponders the word. The images tell stories: the fixed posture of the people, the sideways feet he finds funny, the clothes, the colour. He becomes a frequent visitor. The stories are good.

At the Great Pyramid, he enters the long passageway. His candle flickers. Many steps up, across, and up again. Will he suffocate? Finally, he enters the king's large tomb chamber, bigger than his room at home. But alas, it is empty.

He goes to Babylonia. Hammurabi. Very complicated, he thinks. The Hittites. Writing on clay. Then he is in the I Ching. Much better.

After school he has a job gardening for the old lady who lives down the lane. She pays him three dollars and fifty cents for an hour and smiles as she gives him little round pieces of wrapped cheese he has never seen before. He walks home through the back gate, where the asparagus grows. His mother approves the cheese. And now he can afford to buy a book.

The Rigveda is wonderful. And the Upanishads. He goes back for them many times. The Old Testament he knows from years in the church choir. Then the Iliad. The Odyssey. He does not read it all. He gleans.

Herodotus. He gets hooked here. The Father of History. Hmmm.

He sees the name Cicero.

Another book opens a different door: Rosemary Sutcliff's The Eagle of the Ninth, the story of a lost Roman legion. The boy cannot know that this journey will still be unfolding more than seventy years later.

That boy was me. I stopped at ancient Rome because it has so many stories. And I've never left.

Rome became more than a subject to study. It became a way of seeing.

My first visit to Italy didn't come until I was in my forties. Landing in Rome, we drove north into Tuscany, to a thousand-year-old villa overlooking vineyards, orchards and rolling hills. I stood on the terrace with the curious feeling that I had arrived in a place I already knew.

The next day I stood inside an Etruscan tomb. I remained there as long as I could, quietly drinking Italy in.

Since then, Mary and I have walked Roman roads in Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, the Holy Land and, of course, Italy itself. We have wandered through Pompeii in the early morning, crossed the road to the estate of Julia Felix, explored Ostia Antica, walked among the ruins of Italica and Mérida, touched the ancient streets of Diocletian's Palace at Split, and followed footsteps left by people whose names have survived for two thousand years or more.

But this book is not about my travels.

It is about theirs.

The Romans left us buildings, roads, sculptures, letters, poems and histories. They also left us something even more remarkable. They left us their voices.

When Cicero describes the astonishing celestial sphere built by Archimedes, we listen to someone who knew of the device in the ancient world. When Seneca complains about the noise of the public baths beneath his rented rooms, we hear everyday Rome. When Pliny watches Vesuvius erupt, we stand beside him. When Ovid writes from exile on the edge of the empire, we feel his loneliness—the loneliness of a Roman who cannot believe he may never again see his beloved family, friends and city.

Rome never stops.

This book invites you to meet the Romans where they lived.

Archaeology will guide us. Ancient writers will speak with us. Modern discoveries—from buried cities to the extraordinary Antikythera Mechanism recovered from the sea floor—will remind us that the ancient world is still revealing its secrets.

Shall we walk?

Italica

Come with me to Hispania Baetica.

Something extraordinary happened here—something that changed the way one can look at the ancient world forever. We are about to walk together through the magic of ancient Spain and forward through time to the present moment.

Are you ready? Shall we go, my friend? Hang on to your broad-brimmed hat.

It is spring in Seville, Andalusia. Bright blossoms shower us with purple light high above the main street. Mary and I wander through the park surrounding the Archaeological Museum before going inside, where Roman mosaics cover the floors and busts of local dignitaries watch from the galleries.

Venus, the goddess, emerges from the sea accompanied by a dolphin. Her head is missing, yet the surviving figure retains its serenity. Nearby, busts of the emperors Trajan and Hadrian dominate the gallery, as they once dominated the Roman world. Both men were born nearby, at its western edge.

From Seville we drive there, a few miles north to Italica. Founded in 206 BC as the Second Punic War ground toward its conclusion, it became Rome's first permanent settlement in Hispania.

There are few tourists. It is wonderfully quiet.

We enter through the amphitheatre, preserved well enough that we can still make our way through the stone corridors encircling it. We know so little about this place, and yet it feels familiar. The theatre stands outside the city walls; within them lie public

baths, temples—including one dedicated to Venus—a grand theatre, the Forum, and the two familiar main streets, the Cardo and the Decumanus Maximus.

We could be anywhere in the Roman world.

Then comes a question: Why is this city here?

Scipio

We need to talk about Carthage, because it lies at the heart of this story.

Carthage is one of the richest and most powerful civilizations in the ancient Mediterranean. By 206 BC, Rome and Carthage have been fighting in Spain for years. Rome is prevailing, but it is exhausted. The young Roman commander Publius Cornelius Scipio has driven the Carthaginian armies from Hispania after his decisive victory at Ilipa. Four years later, in 202 BC, he defeats Hannibal at Zama and becomes known forever as Scipio Africanus.

Victorious. Honoured. Celebrated.

At Italica, Scipio settles wounded soldiers and Italian veterans who fought beside him. The historian Appian tells us that, after Ilipa, Scipio left them in a town he named Italica for Italy. Livy also preserves glimpses of Roman soldiers forming families with local Iberian women. This was more than a military encampment or a commander's reward. It was Rome taking root in Spain.

Centuries later, Italica would give Rome two emperors, Trajan and Hadrian. It thrived. The veterans, their wives, and their children did not merely occupy Hispania. Together they began creating a Roman world far from Rome.

Another Roman would unknowingly preserve a different part of Scipio's world.

Enter Cicero.

Walking with Cicero

Let us walk with him. He will show us another essential piece of the puzzle.

Marcus Tullius Cicero was a statesman, orator, philosopher and scholar. Mary Beard, the classicist and author of SPQR, has called him brilliant—and perhaps the wittiest Roman who ever lived. You would probably enjoy a walk with him.

We step inside Cicero's philosophical dialogue De Re Publica. The conversation is set in 129 BC.

Gaius Sulpicius Gallus recalls an evening thirty-seven years earlier, at the home of Marcus Marcellus. There Gallus demonstrated a mechanical celestial sphere that reproduced the movements of the sun, the moon and the five planets then known.

Marcellus's grandfather had brought the device home after the Roman capture of Syracuse in 212 BC. Amid the enormous spoils available to him, this was the one object he chose to keep for himself.

Cicero tells us it was built by Archimedes.

If that is true, we are in for an astonishing revelation.

Archimedes

Archimedes of Syracuse was a Greek mathematician, engineer and man of extraordinary gifts. Syracuse, on the southeastern coast of Sicily, was a wealthy Greek city and a Mediterranean power.

This was Archimedes' home.

What was he like?

Our friend Plutarch tells us that Archimedes was perpetually enchanted by his familiar siren—geometry. He would forget to eat, drink or care for himself. Sometimes he had to be carried to the baths, where he continued drawing geometrical figures with a finger on his oiled skin, transported by his science.

Now, do not stare. But look: he is over there.

Descending into the bath, he floats on his back, pondering a request from King Hiero.

Now when we go to the baths, people laugh and shout ‘Eureka!’.

Long before Newton, Archimedes established fundamental relationships among circles, spheres and cylinders. He showed us that the area of a circle equals pi multiplied by the square of its radius, and that the volume and surface area of a sphere are each two-thirds those of the cylinder enclosing it.

According to tradition, he valued this discovery so highly that he asked for a sphere and cylinder to be carved on his tomb. Do not disturb my circles.

His genius was not confined to peaceful geometry. When Roman warships attacked Syracuse, Archimedes designed engines that hurled missiles and grappled with ships. Plutarch describes a crane-like device capable of lifting a vessel by the bow before dropping or capsizing it. The Roman commander Marcellus compared Archimedes to Briareus, the hundred-handed giant, and complained that the geometer used Roman ships like cups for ladling water from the sea.

Marcellus had attacked the city with an enormous floating siege ladder called the sambuca. Archimedes answered machinery with machinery.

Cicero marvelled at him for another reason. In De Re Publica - and later in the Tusculan Disputations - he described a celestial sphere in which one turning movement reproduced the different courses of the sun, moon and planets. The device could show the moon entering Earth’s shadow and the moon passing before the sun: lunar and solar eclipses rendered by mechanism.

‘Give me a place to stand,’ Archimedes is said to have declared, ‘and I will move the world.’

Then our story shifts again.

Archimedes dies. Syracuse falls. The celestial sphere travels to Rome.

And, eventually, the mechanism disappears from history.

Antikythera

Come with me now. We are approaching the heart of the matter.

It may be best to bring your diving suit. This is deep.

Two millennia have passed—longer than the Roman Republic and Empire combined. The year is 1900. A small group of Greek sponge divers from the island of Symi, led by Captain Dimitrios Kontos, plans to work off the coast of North Africa. A storm drives them off course, and they take refuge near Antikythera, the small island between Crete and the Greek mainland.

While they wait, a diver puts on a rubberized-canvas suit and a domed helmet of copper and brass. Apart from a rope, his only connection to the boat is an air hose supplied from the surface. He drops some forty-five metres to the seabed and searches for sponges.

Suddenly, he signals to be hauled up.

He surfaces terrified, gasping that he has seen dead bodies and a dead horse. Curiosity overcomes the captain, who descends and returns with a bronze arm. The ‘bodies’ are statues - marble and bronze figures scattered across an ancient shipwreck.

The captain and his crew help the Greek navy and the National Archaeological Museum in recovering the cargo. The ship carried magnificent works of art, including the bronze Antikythera Youth, a masterpiece dating from the fourth century BC. The wreck itself belongs to the first century BC; nothing recovered from it is later than the middle of that century.

Among the treasures is a green, corroded lump of encrusted bronze. It is placed in a box at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. It sits. Time passes.

Then someone notices a gear—and everything changes.

The Ancient Computer

Archaeologists, historians and scientists have identified the Antikythera Mechanism as an astronomical calculating machine.

Professor Tony Freeth, a British mathematician and Honorary Professor of Mechanical Engineering at University College London, is a leading member of the UCL Antikythera Research Team. He describes the Antikythera Mechanism as a Greek analogue computer more than 2,000 years old.

In 2005, Professor Freeth organized the initiative to bring an 8-ton, high-resolution microfocus X-ray CT scanner to the National Archaeological Museum in Athens to study the mechanism.

This revealed thousands of hidden Greek characters engraved on the inside plates. These allowed decoding and proved the computer used a 223 month Babylonian cycle to accurately predict solar and lunar eclipses, track the 19 year Metonic calendar still used today, (Easter Sunday), and count down the Panhellenic Games.

It explains why Cicero suddenly makes sense. Today.

Cicero had seen devices attributed to Archimedes. We cannot say that the Antikythera Mechanism itself was made by Archimedes; it was constructed long after his death. But Tony Freeth and other researchers have argued that it belongs to a technological tradition in which Archimedes may have played a formative part. Behind the surviving object lie many workshops, many craftspeople and generations of accumulated knowledge.

The sea preserved what time and human need would otherwise have destroyed: statues, inscriptions, gears—and evidence of a world capable of imagining the heavens as a machine.

Return to Italica

Now we read Cicero again, and every sentence means something different.

He was not merely repeating a fantasy. He was describing an object that stood before him: a machine capable of bringing the movements of the heavens into a Roman room.

That is an astonishing moment.

Then we return to Italica, back where we began—not because these stories are directly connected, but because they are joined by memory.

Scipio built a city.

Archimedes built a machine.

Cicero preserved their worlds in words.

Archaeology returned those worlds to us.

Today, we walk among them.