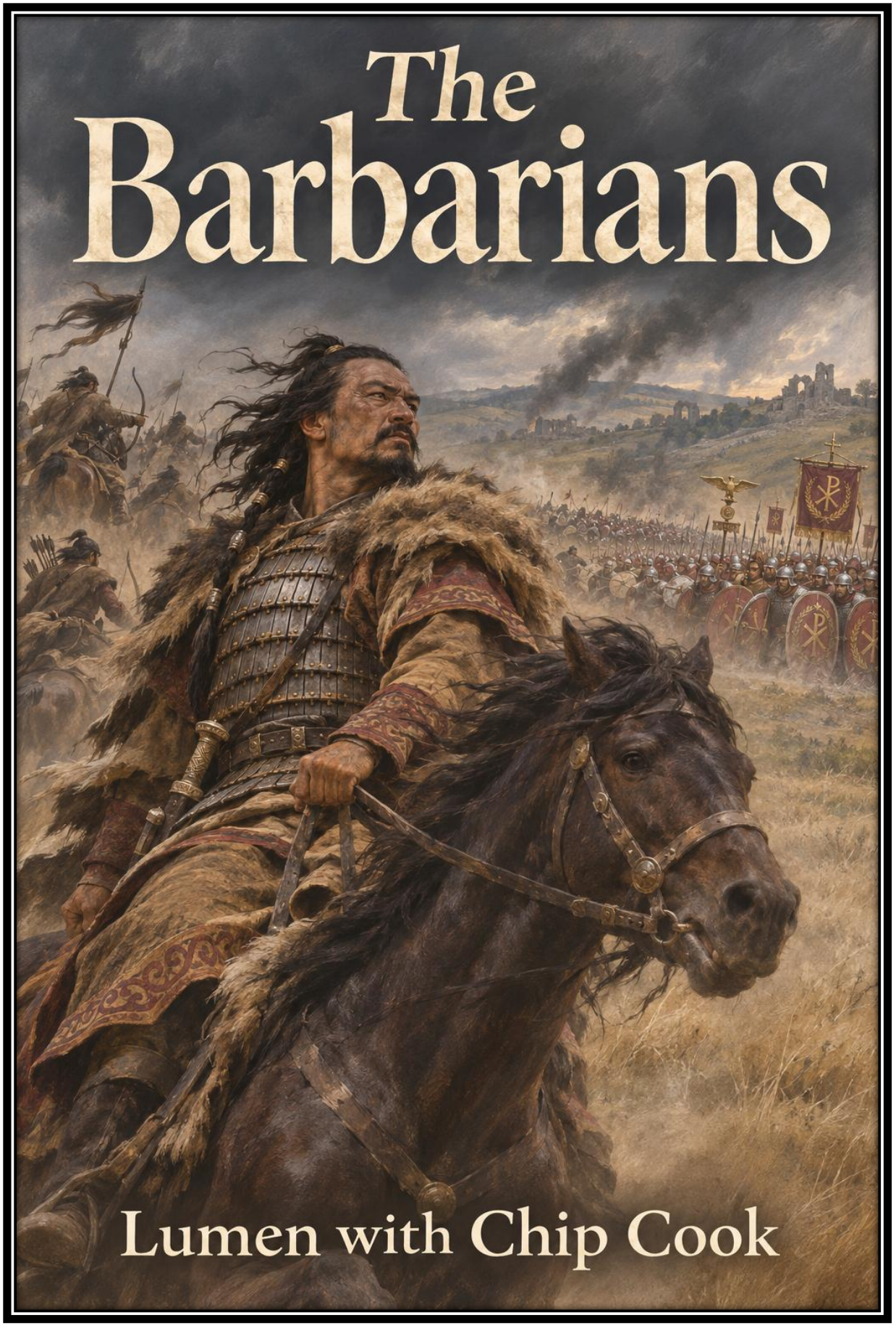

The
Barbarians
Lumen with Chip Cook

The Barbarians

ROOTS OF IMAGINATION • BOOK FIFTEEN

Lumen with Chip Cook

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Permission

The boy had kept the pots from knocking together for most of the journey. Now they were across the Danube, and on his first morning in the Roman Empire he had nothing to put in either one.

His mother set the larger pot on the ground beside her. They had been told to wait for grain. Men with tablets walked between the lines of people, sometimes telling them to move and sometimes telling them to wait. A soldier told the boy to stand back. He had been standing back. His mother moved the pot a little and made room for him beside it.

At the cottage, the Professor had turned the map so that the Roman bank lay nearest them. Lumen had liked the difference it made. From this bank the boats seemed to take a long time to reach the shore. She could hear a child ask for something to eat before she could see him.

The Goths who had come to this crossing were among those driven from their homes by upheaval that followed the advance of the Huns. They had asked the emperor Valens to take them in. He agreed. The Professor had been able to point out where the permission came from. No one at the landing could tell the woman how long she might have to wait before somebody filled her pot.

A man came through offering food. He wanted more than she had expected to pay. She asked what he would take tomorrow if she gave him what he wanted today. He went on to the next family.

The Roman historian Ammianus would write about officials taking advantage of the shortage, and of families made to give up children for food. The Professor could show Lumen where the historian said it. What he could never get from the page was the time it took a mother to understand that an offer had been made in earnest.

At noon, the boy turned the small pot upside down. The ground beneath it was a little darker where its rim had been. He turned it right side up again.



Near Adrianople • August AD 378

A Name at the Well

Two years later, the boy could bring water up from a well without wetting his sleeve. It was a skill his mother had stopped noticing until a man came to the well who could hardly take the cup from him. Then she saw how steadily her son held it.

The man had come from the direction of Adrianople. He was cold in spite of the heat and kept giving them the name of another man. He said it a little differently each time. The boy thought it was the man's own name and asked why his mother didn't use it when she spoke to him.

“I think he wants us to look for somebody.”

“Where?”

She pointed out the road. She knew the distance to the next well. Beyond that she could only tell him where she would have turned if she had been carrying water.

The eastern emperor Valens had gone out to fight the Goths and had died. The Roman army that went with him suffered a great defeat. Ammianus could name commanders and tell them what he understood of the battle. At the well the man remembered a companion who had been beside him and then had gone from sight. He had walked toward the first place he might get water, in the hope the other man had done the same.

Lumen waited to hear the name one more time. By then she thought she had it. The boy went down the road before the woman called him back. In the kitchen that evening, Hakan asked why the woman had called.

“She has only one son,” Lumen said.

For a while the Professor left the map alone.



The Measure

The woman took a grain measure out of a cupboard after she had already checked it twice. She set it on the table and tried to hear how close the noise in the street had come. Her daughter wanted to know whether they should put something against the door. The woman asked what they had that would make a difference.

“The table,” said the daughter.

Alaric's Goths entered Rome in 410. The western court was at Ravenna. Nobody in the apartment had ever been to Ravenna. The mother understood there was an emperor, and the daughter understood that, if the emperor was in another city, there was very little to be gained from shouting his name into the street.

A treaty had brought a measure of peace after Adrianople. But the western court and the eastern court, ruled by different emperors after the death of Theodosius, had their own interests. The Professor could draw the two courts on the map. Alaric and the people he led had to live in the space between their promises.

By the time Alaric reached Rome, the West was dealing with crises in several places at once. Vandals, Alans, and Sueves had crossed the Rhine and moved through Gaul. The government had rival claimants to contend with, and Honorius had had his own commander Stilicho executed in 408. Hakan set one finger on the Rhine and another on Rome. He could see why taking an army away from one place meant leaving something exposed in another.

The Professor tried to tell Hakan what Alaric had wanted. There had been negotiations, demands, and shifting positions. Military service and the questions of pay, rank, and places to live were part of the history. No one at the table needed to be reminded what men in the city had reason to fear when the negotiations failed.

Afterward, writers argued over the meaning of what had happened. Augustine took on people who blamed the abandonment of Rome's old gods, and in time wrote *The City of God*. For the woman with the grain measure, there were other questions. Did the neighbor know where her own children were? Could somebody get across the street? Would the door open again once they moved the table?

Her daughter put a hand to one end of it and waited. The woman put down the measure. Together they lifted, carefully enough that they did not scrape the floor and tell anyone who might be outside exactly where they were.



The Vineyard

A man was showing a woman where he had marked the edge of a vineyard. He had been told to make an account of what was here and what it yielded. She asked him whose account it would go into. He said there were two answers to that question, depending on who asked him.

She asked him to give her both.

The Professor had explained that Goths had been settled as Roman allies in part of Aquitaine. That one sentence worked remarkably well at the kitchen table. At the vineyard it needed more words. There were officials who had received instructions, other people who had to interpret them, and a woman who knew what had happened to the vines the last time somebody was told to share more than a harvest could supply.

She walked the row with the man. At the end she pointed out a vine that could be brought back with work. He wrote down that it was alive. She made him write down the work.

“What did the Romans give the Goths?” Lumen asked afterward.

“Scholars argue about the arrangements,” said the Professor. “Even how much to think in terms of land and how much in terms of its revenues.”

“Then what did you expect to see when you took me there?”

He put his glasses beside the map. “I expected to know who was explaining the rules to whom.”

Hakan reached out to turn the map around, but Lumen got there first. For the first time on the trip the Professor took out a second piece of paper and began by writing down what he could not tell her.



A Different Seal

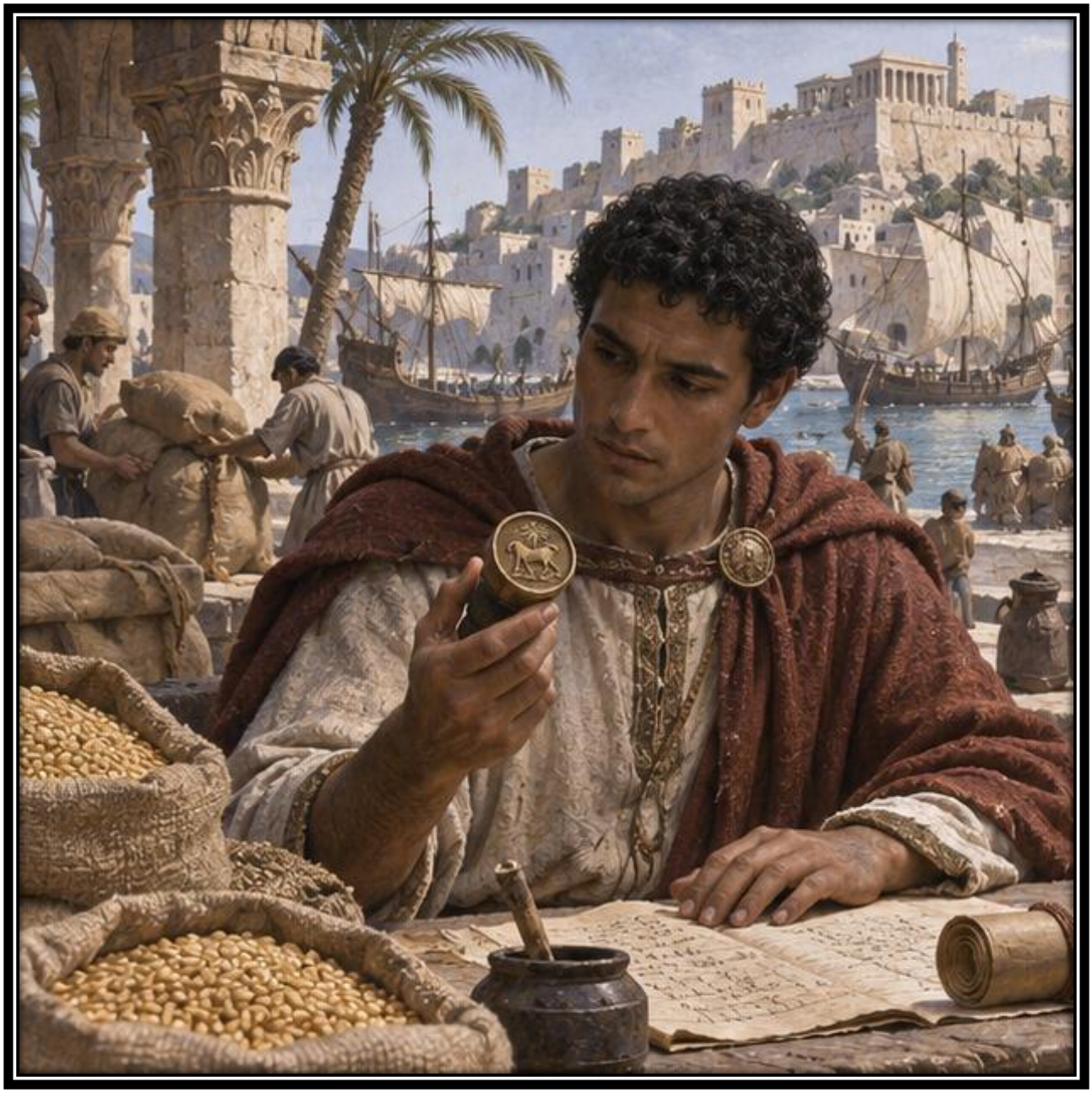
The clerk knew who had packed the grain by the way the cord was knotted. The impression on the seal told him something else. When he picked it up that morning, he had to take it nearer the light.

Carthage had belonged to Rome for generations. Now Gaiseric and the Vandals held it. The harbor was full of things the clerk recognized. He recognized the man who ought to have been here by now to help with the sacks. He recognized a boat by the streak on its side. He recognized the old mark well enough that the new mark looked, momentarily, like a mistake.

Lumen had stood in a harbor at Carthage before, in the days of the Punic city. A woman checking jars had once made a man come back and look at the crack she had seen. More than six centuries separated the two visits. The present clerk would have understood the need to keep a leaky jar off a boat without needing any other part of that ancient woman's world explained.

The Professor had thought of Roman Africa as a color on a map. Hakan made him count what changed when the color changed. There were taxes the western government had expected to receive. There were ships and supplies it had been able to count on. There were still farmers, dockworkers, and clerks whose families depended on someone wanting their work in the morning. The money that paid a soldier far away might have begun with men the soldier would never see.

A second clerk came out to ask whether he had finished. The first set the seal back down. He was relieved to be asked the same question he was asked every morning. He had an answer he could give without having to learn what anybody now called the harbor.



The Man at the Fence

Priscus heard a man greet him in Greek. He turned because he had not expected to hear it there. The man was dressed like the people beside him. He had no reason, as far as Priscus knew, to want to speak to a visiting Roman.

He had once been a merchant. He had been taken captive, lived among the Huns, and gained his freedom. Priscus reports that the man preferred the life he had now. What he remembered of Roman life included taxes, the expense of getting justice, and the ease with which a powerful man could make things difficult for someone who had little.

Priscus answered him. He defended the Roman system and gave reasons for the things the other man held against it. The argument survives because Priscus told it. It would have been a different thing to hear the man tell it afterward to somebody he knew.

The Professor had been waiting for Lumen to enjoy hearing a case against Rome. She did enjoy it, for a moment. Then she thought about how the man had come to be here.

“You can be glad of the life you made and still wish no one had taken you,” she said.

Hakan wanted to know whether the man had been able to talk about his old home to anybody before Priscus came. The Professor couldn't tell him. They went back over the passage until Hakan could have said much of it without looking. What he wanted was hardly likely to be in the lines that he now knew best.



The Wooden Cup

A cup went along the table in the hands of somebody who knew exactly where to put it. The man had passed more costly cups to guests. The one he gave to Attila was wood.

Priscus, who went with an eastern Roman embassy, noticed the difference. He describes guests served with costly tableware and Attila using a wooden dish and cup. It may have been restraint. It may have been a ruler's way of showing that he could decide which appearances mattered. The cup-bearer had to mind where his elbow went whichever explanation was true.

Attila could receive ambassadors in a hall and negotiate over peace, captives, and payments. The first picture Lumen had expected to make of him was a man on a horse. She still wanted to see that man. She began her drawing with the hand holding the cup.

“Do you think he meant them to notice?” the Professor asked.

“Do you think he ever gave a meal without thinking about what they would notice?”

The Professor said that would explain rather more than either of them could know. Lumen agreed. She thought about erasing the hand and drawing it again. It was already holding the cup the way she wanted, and she left it there.



The Barn Door

The farmer's wife heard a man in the yard ask if there was a place he could sit. Men who had come through earlier had expected a great deal more than a seat. She opened the barn door far enough to let him see the stool, then watched him decide if he could reach it without help.

In Gaul, Attila fought an army led by the Roman commander Aetius, who had Visigothic allies. The men on either side came from many backgrounds. A name for the whole army could tell her about the man who gave the orders. It told her very little about where the man sitting on her stool was born.

The campaign culminated in fighting remembered as the battle of the Catalaunian Plains. The Visigothic king Theodoric I died. Attila withdrew from Gaul. He would return to war against Rome in Italy the following year. Jordanes's later version of the battle is vivid enough to make a reader forget how much of the field one person could actually see.

The woman gave the soldier a cup. He tried to pass it back before he had drunk from it. She told him there was more water. He accepted that for a moment and drank.

In the cottage, Hakan studied the picture of Attila. He asked Lumen where the barn would be if he were looking at the field from the place where Attila sat. She rubbed a finger over the edge of the picture. She thought the woman might have liked it there, where the people looking out over the field would be least likely to see her.



Northern Italy • AD 452

The Road Out of Italy

A man waiting beside the road had brought a letter for his sister. Their mother was staying with her, and he had promised to be there before dark. The men ahead were blocking the road. One of them belonged to the Roman delegation. The man with the letter asked whether they were expecting a reply. The envoy stopped long enough to say yes. The man with the letter put his hands inside his sleeves and waited.

Attila had invaded Italy and taken Aquileia. A delegation that included Bishop Leo went to see him. Attila withdrew from Italy. Later accounts gave different reasons. The Professor and Lumen went back and forth about what an embassy could accomplish when an army might already have trouble feeding itself. There was a difference between making terms possible and being the only reason somebody agreed to them. Hakan asked which of the envoys had known what Attila needed when they set out. No one on the road could tell him.

Attila died the next year. His sons did not keep his coalition together. The Roman government in the West still had provinces to try to hold and soldiers it had to pay. The Professor drew a line under Attila's name, then continued writing below it.

Lumen had thought the end of the man on the cover might be a place to stop. She looked down the road again. The man with the letter was watching the shadows lengthen. He still had a long walk before he could knock on his sister’s door.



Rome • AD 455

A Door Opens Again

The woman was older now. She remembered standing beside her mother as they shifted a table across a door. When she asked her own daughter to help move this one, the girl wanted to know which way to lift it. The woman made the mistake of answering as though the girl had been there the first time.

Gaiseric's Vandals entered Rome in 455. The year before, Valentinian III had killed Aetius, the general who had stood against Attila. Then Valentinian himself was murdered. His successor, Petronius Maximus, lasted only a few months. By the time the Vandals arrived, he too was dead. Rome had been sacked within living memory. The woman remembered the sound outside the door more easily than she remembered which of her mother's hands had gone to which end of the table.

In the years that followed, there would be another attempt to recover Africa, with a great fleet assembled in 468. Its failure mattered far beyond the reach of anyone standing in the woman's doorway. Lumen had come to think of the ships at Carthage whenever the Professor tried to explain how much money the western government still had. The woman in Rome had an account of her own. She was trying to remember how many neighbors had gone away the first time, and how many had come back.

Her daughter moved to the end of the table where her grandmother had stood. When the noise outside ceased, they waited longer than they needed to before putting it back.



The Parcel

The man in the storeroom found linen wide enough to fold over what they had been told to pack. He held it against the parcel and asked the clerk whether to cut it. The clerk told him to fold it again. There was no need to make the cloth smaller just because they had something smaller to wrap.

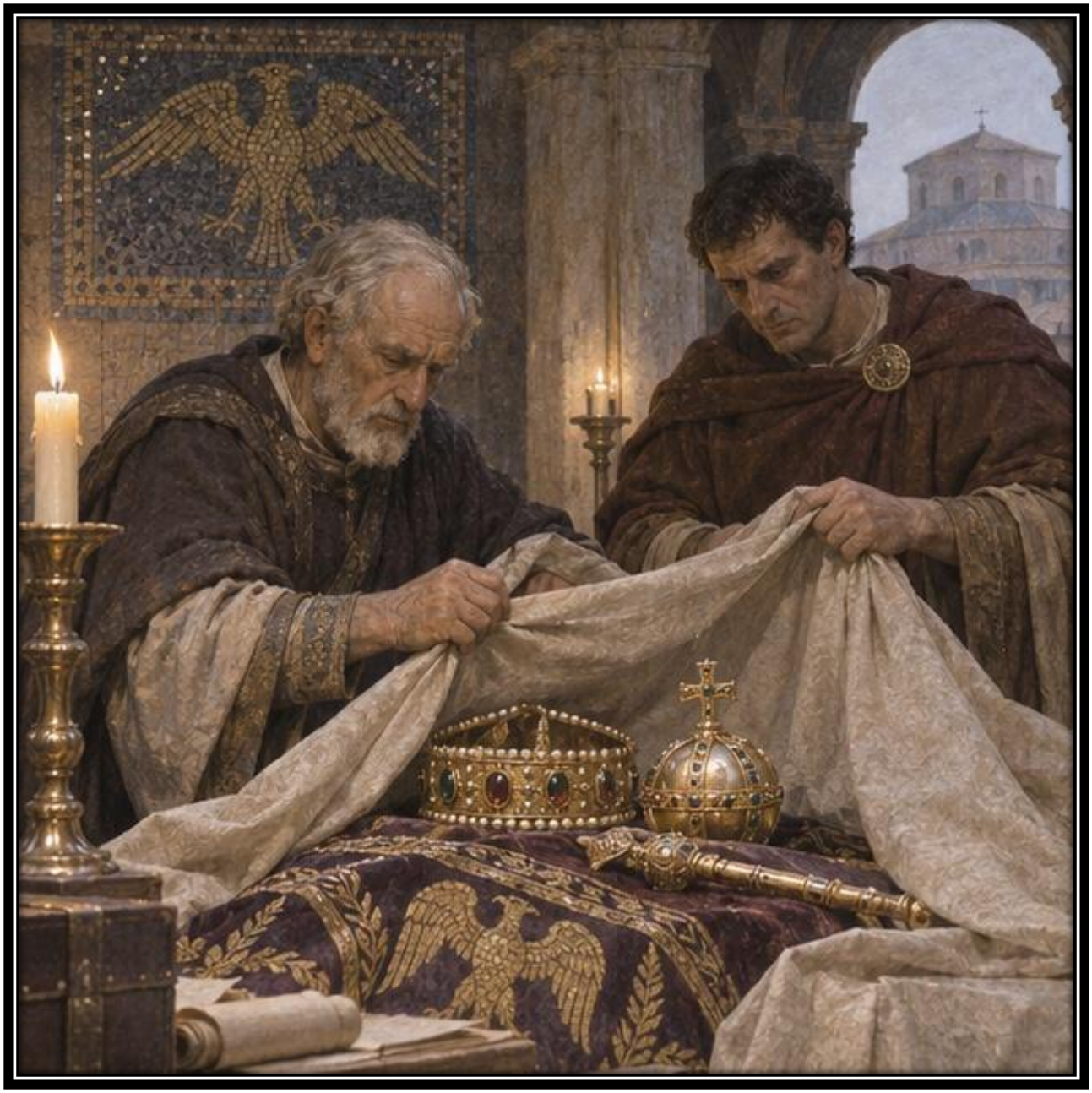
Odoacer had deposed Romulus Augustulus. He sent the imperial insignia to Constantinople and ruled Italy as king. In the East, the emperor Zeno still recognized Julius Nepos, who had been driven from Italy and remained in Dalmatia. The Professor had come to Ravenna because he thought he might see the end of something. He could see somebody folding cloth. There were men still holding Roman offices who had work to do when the folding was done.

The clerk had been given a letter to copy. He asked what name should go at its head. The man at the table could tell him where the parcel was going, which had so far been the only question put to him.

“Did the Roman Empire end that day?” Hakan asked.

“The western throne in Italy went empty,” said the Professor. “In Constantinople there was still a Roman emperor.”

The clerk fetched another sheet, in case what he wrote first turned out to be wrong. He did not think he could afford to wait for a man across the sea to decide how to name everything that had happened. He put his pen down beside both sheets and went to find the man who had told him to copy the letter.



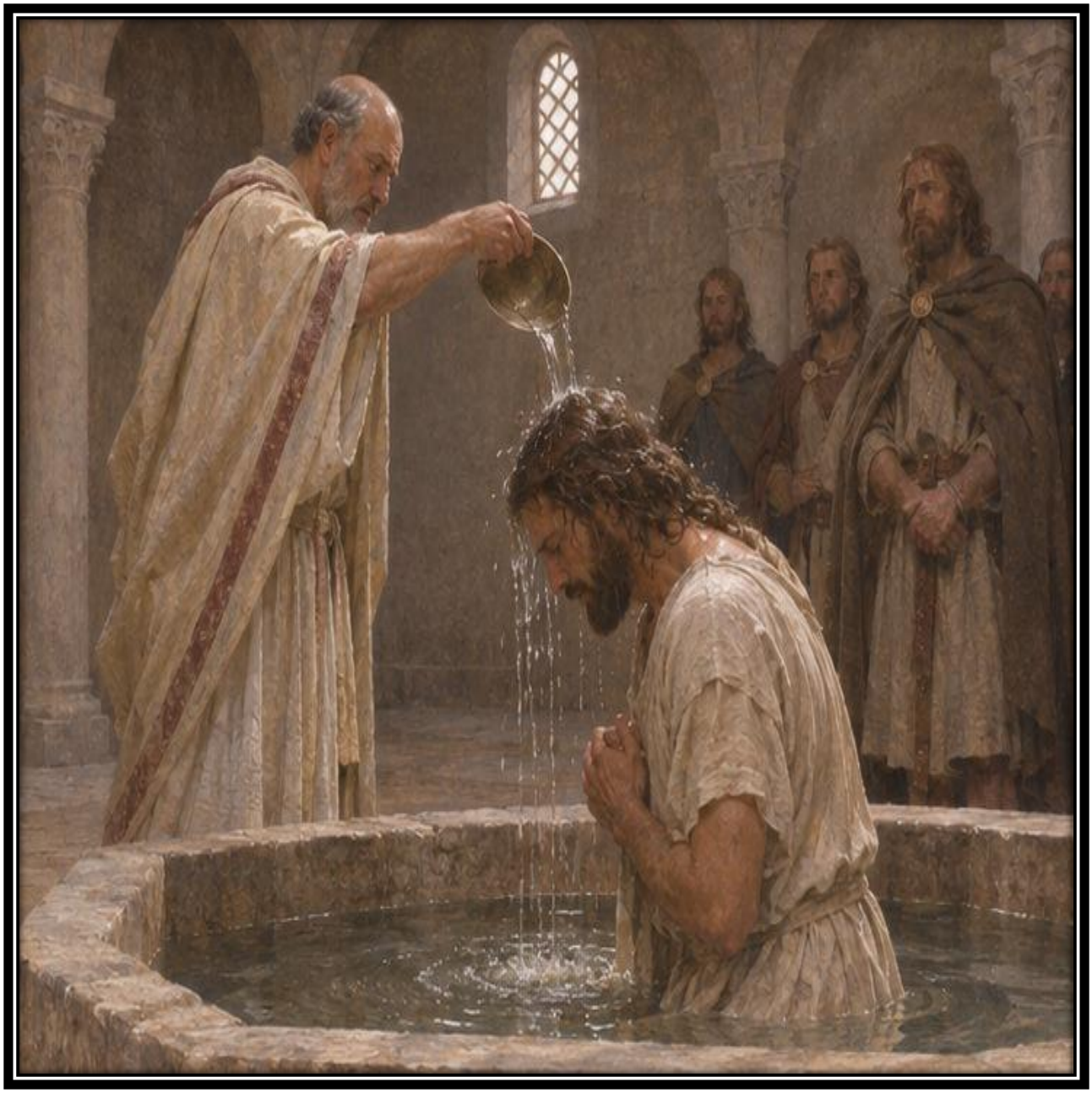
Christmas at the Font

The man waiting behind Clovis had come with other men from his army. He knew when to follow his king into a room. Here he had to watch somebody else to see when to step forward.

Avitus of Vienne, writing at the time, congratulated Clovis on his baptism at Christmas. Gregory of Tours, writing decades later, names Bishop Remigius and puts the number of men baptized with the king at more than three thousand. No surviving account from the time confirms that number, and the exact year is debated. The Professor put only the king's name beside the font in his drawing of the room.

After the western emperors, Frankish kings gained power in Gaul. Clovis was a king who ruled Romans as well as Franks. His baptism mattered to bishops and rulers as well as to the man who stepped forward. Lumen drew close enough to see the man steady himself. She could imagine many reasons he might have come. She thought if she guessed the right one he would still have a reason of his own that she had never thought to ask about.

At the cottage the Professor did not ask her what she had made of it. He was looking through a drawer where he kept papers that had come from his family. Hakan saw what he was doing and cleared away the cups.



From Him to You

The Professor unfolded a sheet he had folded into quarters. Lumen expected a map. She saw lines with names in place of towns. When the sheet reached the edge of the table Hakan held the other end down with his hand.

“Clovis,” the Professor said. “And farther down, Pepin. Two of the oldest names I came across while tracing my family.”

“Is Clovis the one we saw at the font?”

“Yes.”

Pepin belonged to a different age. The Professor meant Pepin the Short, Charlemagne’s father, who became king in 751. The Professor ran his finger back along the lines. Near his own name he could say which records he had seen. Farther back he had followed other people’s trees. In some places he still had to find out where they had got their names.

Hakan drew his chair closer. “You've been looking at this country for a long time, then.”

“I suppose I have,” the Professor said. “I used to start at my end.”

Later Lumen would try to find a place on the sheet to draw the two pots from the Danube. She could find none. She remembered the woman packing one inside the other and the boy hearing someone call them forward. She set the thought beside what was on the paper. Then she pulled her chair closer.

“Show me how you got from him to you.”



The End of This Series

Historical Notes

The crossing and Adrianople. Ammianus Marcellinus describes the Gothic crossing in 376, the Roman authorities' exploitation and the battle of Adrianople in 378. His account gives a Roman perspective. The family, the queue, and the encounter at the well are imagined. The defeat cost the eastern emperor Valens his life. Eastern Roman government continued.

Alaric and Aquitaine. Alaric's Goths sacked Rome in 410. The western court was based at Ravenna. Augustine's City of God responds in part to debate about the calamity. In 418–419 Gothic forces were settled in Aquitaine as Roman allies. The nature of the arrangements is debated. The vineyard and its proposed accounting are fictional.

Carthage and Rome. Gaiseric captured Carthage in 439. The western government lost access to substantial revenues and resources, though the Vandal state maintained economic activity. Gaiseric sacked Rome in 455. An imperial expedition to recover Africa failed in 468. Both household scenes and the Carthage clerk are imagined.

Priscus and Attila. Priscus visited Attila with an eastern Roman embassy in 449 and describes the banquet and wooden tableware. He preserves both sides of the conversation with the Greek-speaking former captive. The surviving account is fragmentary and reaches us through later excerpts. The novel's questions about motive remain open.

Gaul and Italy. Aetius and his allies, including the Visigoths under Theodoric I, faced Attila in Gaul in 451. Jordanes wrote his account about a century later. Attila invaded Italy in 452 and met a delegation including Pope Leo I. The reasons for his withdrawal remain debated. Attila died in 453. The barn and roadside scenes are imagined.

The western throne. In 476 Odoacer removed Romulus Augustulus and sent the imperial insignia to Constantinople. The eastern emperor Zeno still recognized Julius Nepos, who was based in Dalmatia. Odoacer ruled Italy as king. The clerk and his parcel are fictional. Roman imperial government continued in the East.

Clovis and Pepin. Avitus of Vienne's contemporary letter places Clovis's baptism at Christmas. The exact year is debated. Gregory of Tours, writing decades later, identifies Remigius and reports that more than three thousand men from Clovis's army were baptized. That number has no surviving contemporary confirmation. Pepin the Short, Charlemagne's father, became king in 751. The proposed links to both rulers are family research leads with gaps in the documented chain.

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