Lovereading.co.uk

History without the Boring Bits

Ian Crofton

Published by Quercus

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

First published in Great Britain in 2007 by

Quercus
21 Bloomsbury Square
London
WC1A 2NS

Copyright © Quercus Publishing Plc 2007

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

The picture credits constitute an extension to this copyright notice.

Quercus Publishing Plc hereby exclude all liability to the extent permitted by law for any errors or omissions in this book and for any loss, damage or expense (whether direct or indirect) suffered by a third party relying on any information contained in this book.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-10: 1 84724 086 0
ISBN-13: 978 1 84724 086 6

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Butler and Tanner, Frome

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

The Ancient World 1

The Middle Ages 23

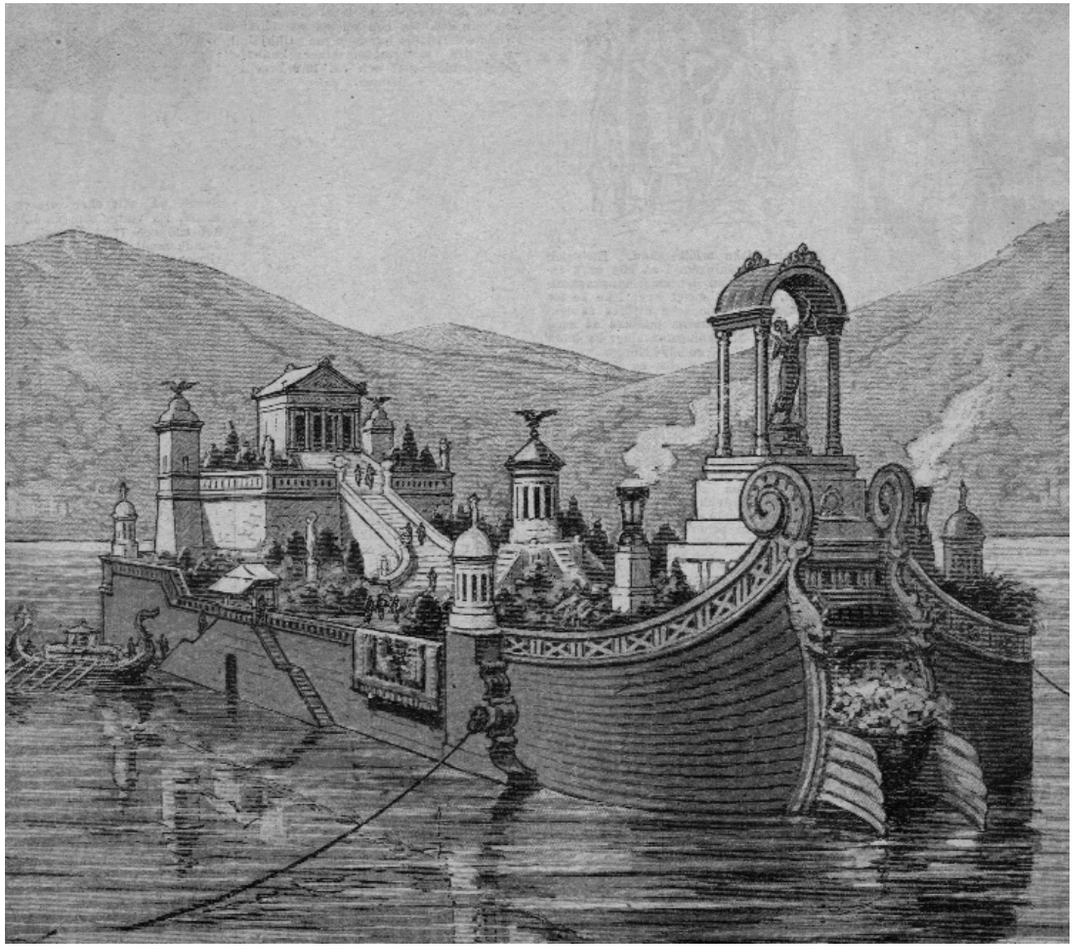
The 16th Century 59

The 17th Century 83

The 18th Century 121

The 19th Century 185

From 1900 to the Present 263



The Emperor Caligula's floating palace on Lake Nemi, near Rome.

The Ancient World

Galactic Tyrant Peoples Earth ❧ Tortoise Slays Playwright ❧ The Case of the Missing Penises ❧ Philosopher Urinates on Diners ❧ The Rotting Emperor and the Putrid Fish ❧ Seneca and the Armpit Plucker ❧ Legalization of Flatulence ❧ Sow's Womb and Mackerel Guts ❧ Incest and Matricide ❧ A Tax on Public Lavatories ❧ On the Iniquities of Soap ❧ Self-castration ❧ Drowned in Rose Petals ❧ Two Breasts on a Platter ❧ A Fatal Evacuation of the Bowels ❧ Thirty-Six Years on Top of a Pillar ❧

75 million years ago

Galactic Tyrant Peoples Earth

According to the doctrines of Scientology, the galactic tyrant Xenu kidnapped hundreds of billions of individuals from other parts of the galaxy and sent them to planet Earth to be exterminated. They arrived by craft that looked like Douglas DC-8s, but which were in fact powered by rockets. The exiles were then exposed to thermonuclear explosions, prior to being brainwashed by a 36-day-long 3-D movie into believing that they were at the same time Jesus, God and the Devil. The victims subsequently parasitized human bodies, and can apparently only be removed by advanced Scientological techniques.

4004 BC

The Day of Creation

The date of Creation, according to James Ussher, Protestant Archbishop of Armagh, in his 1650 work, *Annales veteris testamenti, a prima mundi origine deducti* ('Annals of the Old Testament, deduced from the first origins of the world'). More precisely, Ussher calculated – on the basis of his interpretation of Biblical texts – that the Earth had been brought into being on the evening preceding 23 October 4004 BC. It turns out that the Earth is nearly a million times older than Ussher suggested.

616 BC

Burial Alive

Tarquinius Priscus became king of Rome. It was Tarquinius who instituted the traditional punishment for any Vestal Virgin who lost her virginity. The unfortunate woman was walled up alive in an underground chamber called the Campus Scleratus, and was sometimes supplied with food and water to prolong her slow death. Until the abolition of the Vestal Virgins in AD 391, some 22 Vestal Virgins appear to have suffered either immuration or burial alive.

532 BC

Leader Goes to War in Middle East Having Deliberately Misinterpreted the Intelligence

King Croesus of Lydia asked the Delphic Oracle if the signs were propitious for an attack on the Persian Empire. The Pythoness – the priestess of the Oracle – pronounced that 'If Croesus crosses the River Halys, a great empire shall be destroyed.' Insensitive to any ambiguity in this prophecy, Croesus attacked – and his army was utterly annihilated. The Oracle's pronouncement on this occasion was a model of clarity, compared to the usual wild ramblings that came from the Pythoness – whose trances may have been caused by natural emanations of methane, ethanol and carbon dioxide in her cave.

525 BC

On the Relative Puniness of Persian vs. Egyptian Skulls

At the decisive Battle of Pelusium, near Port Said, the Persians under Cambyses II defeated the Egyptians, and went on to conquer the country. In the 5th century, the Greek historian Herodotus visited the site and found the remains of the fallen still scattered across the battlefield. In the interests of impartial investigation, he noted that if you threw a pebble at a Persian skull it would make a hole in it, while even if you struck an Egyptian skull with a rock, 'you will scarcely break it in'. He ascribed the difference to the Egyptian practice of shaving the head from infancy, while the Persians covered theirs with folds of cloth.

Army Disappears in Desert

After his conquest of Egypt, Cambyses sent an army to the Siwa Oasis in Egypt's Western Desert, perhaps to persuade the Oracle of Amun to recognize his rule. But the 50,000 men never reached their destination, being overwhelmed, according to Herodotus, by a sandstorm. Exactly 2525 years later, geologists from Helwan University, prospecting for petroleum, found themselves among sand dunes

littered with fragments of textiles and weapons, and the bleached bones of men who may once have belonged to the Lost Army of Cambyses.

circa 456 BC

Tortoise Slays Playwright ❧ The Greek dramatist Aeschylus died when an eagle dropped a tortoise on his bald head.

circa 434 BC

Sun Larger than the Peloponnese, Argues Greek Philosopher ❧ The Greek philosopher Anaxagoras was exiled from Athens for denying the divine nature of heavenly bodies. He asserted that the Sun was a great disc of blazing metal larger than the Peloponnese, and that the planets were lumps of rock torn from the Earth and set on fire by the rapidity of their rotation.

circa 430 BC

Volcanic Suicides ❧ The Greek philosopher Empedocles died by throwing himself into the active crater of Mount Etna. His intention had been that people should believe – in the absence of his body – that he had ascended to heaven as a god. His ruse was foiled when the volcano spewed forth one of his bronze sandals. The fate of Empedocles may have inspired the American tourist who, in 1859 – having received unhappy news from home – threw himself into a lava flow on the flank of Vesuvius, and was instantly incinerated.

415 BC

The Case of the Missing Penises ❧ (May) The Greek general Alcibiades was accused of knocking the phalli off all the hermai in Athens, a

scandalously sacrilegious act. Hermai were pillars set up outside houses adorned with male genitals and topped with a head of the god Hermes (supposedly the inventor of masturbation). Alicibiades, who set off on an expedition against Syracuse shortly afterwards, was sentenced to death in his absence.

390 BC

Geese Save Rome ❧ The sacred geese on the Capitoline Hill in Rome saved the city by making such a noise as the besieging Gauls attempted a covert night attack that the guards were roused and repelled the invaders.

circa 350 BC

Philosopher Urinates on Diners ❧ The Greek philosopher Diogenes, disdaining the social niceties, lived like a dog – naked, scratching and defecating in the street – so earning the nickname 'the Dog' (Greek *kuon* – thus his followers became known as the Cynics, from the Greek *Kunikos*). The citizens of Athens indulged Diogenes' foibles, even throwing bones to him at a banquet. He showed his gratitude by urinating on their legs.

346 BC

If . . . ❧ Having conquered much of the rest of Greece, Philip II of Macedon sent a message to the Spartans: 'You are advised to submit without further delay, for if I bring my army into your land, I will destroy your farms, slay your people, and raze your city.' They sent a one-word reply: 'If.' Their boldness paid off: Philip left them alone.

334 BC

Outwitting Alexander ❧ Alexander the Great crossed the Dardanelles to begin his conquest of the Persian Empire. He was

accompanied by one of his favourites, the rhetorician Anaximenes. Anxious to save his native city of Lampascus from destruction, Anaximenes asked for an audience with Alexander. Anticipating his request, Alexander swore an oath that he would deny Anaximenes' request. The cunning Anaximenes then spoke: 'My lord,' he said, 'I have only come to beg you to destroy Lampascus.' Alexander had no other choice but to honour his oath and spare the city.

331 BC

Guided by Crows ❧ According to the contemporary historian Callisthenes of Olynthus, Alexander's army was guided through a desert by a flock of crows. The birds would fly ahead as the men followed them, or wait for them if they tarried. Even at night the crows called out to show the way.

274 BC

King Killed by Roof Tile ❧ King Pyrrhus of Epirus was killed during the Siege of Argos when a poor old woman taking refuge on a roof threw down a tile onto his head. She was displeased at the way the king was setting upon her son, a man, according to Plutarch, 'of mean condition'. The tile hit Pyrrhus's helmet, which would have saved him had not the tile then ricocheted onto his neck, fatally fracturing his spinal column.

213 BC

Archimedes' Death Ray ❧ During the Roman siege of Syracuse, Archimedes is said to have used arrays of polished shields to focus the Sun's rays onto the Roman ships, so setting them alight.

210 BC

The Rotting Emperor and the Putrid Fish ❧ The first Chinese emperor, Shi Huangdi, died while searching for the Islands of the Immortals

off the east coast of China. His chief minister, Li Si, was worried that if the imperial death became common knowledge there would very likely be a popular rebellion, so brutal and oppressive had been the emperor's rule. So during the two-month journey back to the capital, Li Si visited the emperor's carriage daily, giving the impression that he was discussing the affairs of the realm. And he disguised the smell of the emperor's bodily decay by positioning wagons full of fish before and after the emperor's carriage.

184 BC

Snake Bombs ❧ While leading the Bithynians in a sea battle against the Pergamenes, the exiled Hannibal ordered his men to throw clay pots filled with snakes into the enemy galleys. The enemy, thus thrown into confusion, were readily defeated.

80 BC

The First Computer? ❧ A cargo ship sank off the tiny Greek island of Antikythera, taking to the bottom the so-called Antikythera mechanism, recovered by sponge divers in 1904. The device, a complex assemblage of cogs, wheels and dials, is thought by some to be the first analogue computer, and was probably used to map the motions of the sun, moon and planets.

71 BC

Romans Crucify 6000 Slaves ❧ After the defeat of Spartacus's slave revolt, the Appian Way was lined from Capua to Rome (a distance of more than 100 miles) with the crucified bodies of some 6000 captured rebels. Their decaying corpses were left in place for many years.

41 BC

The Most Expensive Banquet in History? When Mark Antony first met Cleopatra, at Tarsus in modern-day Turkey, their political discussions were lubricated with feast after feast. Indeed Cleopatra wagered Mark Antony that she would lay on the most expensive banquet in history. The next evening, as the banquet neared its end, Mark Antony observed that, though impressive, the meal had been no more lavish than the previous ones. At this Cleopatra took off one of her pearl earrings, extracted a huge pearl, ground it up and dissolved it in wine vinegar, then drank it down. The bet was won.

2 BC

Roman Family Values Julia, the daughter of the Emperor Augustus and wife of his heir Tiberius, shocked Rome and her father by her adulteries and participation in late-night drinking parties in the Forum. She was even said to have put her favours up for sale, and when asked how all her children resembled her husband, explained that she 'only took on new passengers when the boat was already full'. Augustus, who (despite his own infidelities) was determined to uphold family values, exiled his daughter to the tiny volcanic island of Pandataria (modern Ventotene), and forbade her wine and the company of men. Any visitors had to be approved by the emperor, who required details of their stature, complexion and any marks or scars on their body. Julia was allowed to return after five years, but when Tiberius became emperor he confined her to a single room, and may have had her starved to death.

AD 26

A Love of Animals The Emperor Tiberius retreated to Capri, never again to return to Rome. On the island he abandoned himself to vice, indulging, it is said, not only his taste for children, but also goats, donkeys and camels.

AD 31

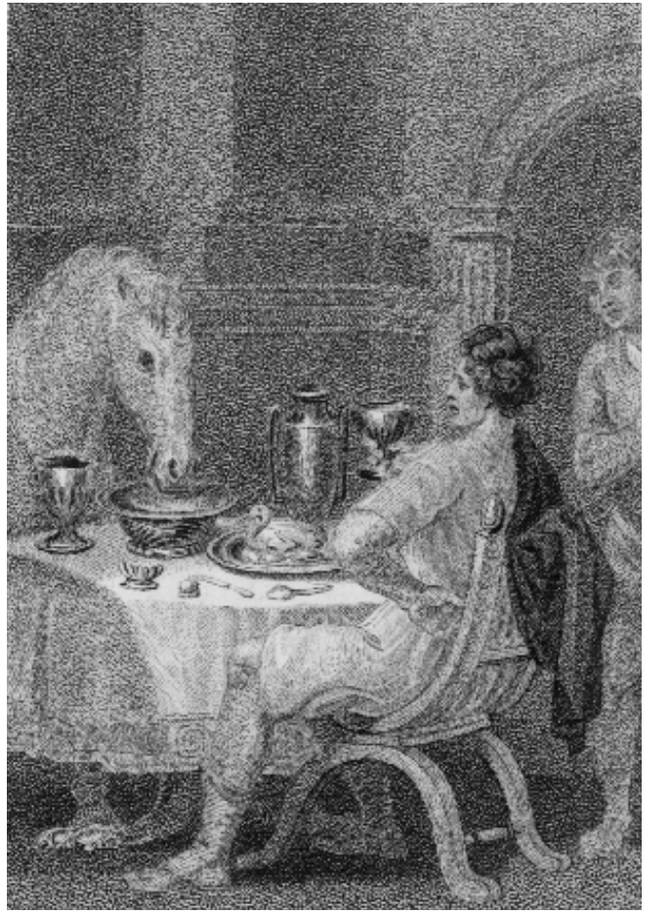
Brutal Logic (18 October) The prefect of the Praetorian Guard, Lucius Aelius Sejanus – who had created a reign of terror in Rome and seduced Livilla, Tiberius's daughter-in-law – was executed for plotting against the emperor. First he was strangled, and then his body was thrown to the mob, who tore it to pieces. Sejanus's three children were likewise put to death, the young girl first being debauched by the public executioner, it being contrary to Roman law to kill a virgin.

AD 37

An Incestuous Emperor Caligula became Roman emperor, despite the prediction of an astrologer that he had no more chance of donning the purple than of riding a horse across the Gulf of Baiae. To show his contempt for this prophecy, Caligula had a pontoon bridge comprising scores of ships built across the Gulf, and proceeded to ride across wearing the breastplate of Alexander the Great.

Caligula turned out to be a mad and depraved despot, who slept with his sisters (and anyone else – of either sex – who caught his fancy), made it an offence for anyone to look at him (he was sensitive about his thinning pate and copious body hair), devised new methods of torture (such as covering the victim with honey, and letting loose a swarm of wasps), and (according to one story) appointed his favourite horse, Incitatus, to the consulship. Another story has it that when his sister Drusilla became pregnant by him, he was so impatient to see his child that he had it ripped from Drusilla's womb. Whether or not this story is true, Drusilla certainly died, whereupon Caligula declared her to be a goddess.

In AD 41 (24 January) Caligula was fatally stabbed in the genitals by two of his guards, whom he had humiliated. They went on to kill his wife, and smashed his baby daughter's head against a wall.



The Emperor Caligula fed his favourite horse, Incitatus, at his table from golden dishes. It was said that he also appointed Incitatus to the consulship, which had been the most senior position in the ancient Republic.

circa AD 40

Seneca and the Armpit Plucker ❧ The Roman playwright Lucius Annaeus Seneca, a noted stoic, found himself bereft of his philosophy when

faced with the noises from the bath house next door to his lodgings. One might think of Roman baths as places of ease and quiet content, but in a letter Seneca tells a different story. 'Conjure up in your imagination,' he told Lucilius, his correspondent, 'all the sounds that make one hate one's ears.' Among these he numbered the grunts of the weightlifters, the slaps of the masseurs, the shouts of the ball-players and the cries of various vendors. Shrillest of all were the shrieks of that most specialized of craftsmen, the armpit plucker, who never desisted from his caterwauling except, according to Seneca, 'when he's doing his job and making someone else shriek for him'.

circa AD 43

Legalization of Flatulence ❧ The Emperor Claudius, worried that holding in flatulence might be injurious to health, passed a law permitting the unleashing of intestinal gases at banquets.

circa AD 50

Sow's Womb and Mackerel Guts ❧ By the 1st century AD, only one in ten people in Rome had access to a hearth where they could cook – so the purveyors of takeaway food did a roaring trade. For the wealthy who dined at home, popular items included roast dormouse, kale cooked in saltpetre, and sow's womb (served with or without udders). Spattered over everything was a ubiquitous fish sauce called garum, made from slow-cooked mackerel guts (production of the pungent, salty sauce within the city was prohibited on account of the stench). A dish for special occasions was the *porcus troianus* ('Trojan pig'), a whole roasted pig stuffed with fruit and sausages. Brought to the table standing on its legs, its belly was then cut open, letting spill the sausages as if they were the animal's entrails. By this time the earlier fashion of allowing one's fish to expire at table (preferably in a sauce) had gone out of favour.