



Surviving the darkest period

Adventure Book



START

The history lesson has just begun in the virtual reality classroom. Professor Ranucci invites the students to put on their VR headsets. "All right, today we're going to take a journey back in time," she says. "As you know, we are living in an era of human-caused climate change. However, history tells us of periods when natural changes in the climate profoundly affected people's lives. Our journey into the past will help us better understand our future."



We'll be travelling back to the 6th century AD, and our story will span the years from 536 to 541 AD. You'll travel through the Eastern Roman Empire in an era marked by climate anomalies, crop failures, wars, trade, and one of the most devastating pandemics in history: the Plague of Justinian. Put on your headsets and let the story carry you away!"



CONTINUE



In the 6th century AD, the Late Antique Little Ice Age occurred, affecting the European continent and neighbouring regions. Despite its name, the phenomenon was not similar to true ice ages but caused significant drops in temperature and greater climatic variability. The study of this ice age and others that followed (between the 16th and 19th centuries) now enables scientists to better understand how our planet works, but above all to determine the extent to which and the ways in which human activities contribute to modern global warming, so that increasingly effective mitigation strategies can be developed.

The students smile with amusement, some rather nervously; the headsets light up and the classroom slowly fades away, as do the voices of their classmates, into a surreal, expectant silence. Their identities dissolve and each is swept away to another time and another life: the life of Anastasios, a young merchant living in the Egyptian port of Clysma.

Life in the harbour is bustling; there are still numerous ships, and from each one comes a jumble of voices and languages, Greek, Latin and Coptic...

But recently something has changed, and life has become more difficult for everyone.



CONTINUE



The port of Clysma is situated in what is now the Gulf of Suez on the Red Sea. For many historians, just like the port of Pelusium – situated on the Nile Delta and considered the first epicentre of the disease, recorded in July 541 – Clysma is regarded as one of the points of entry for the plague bacterium (*Yersinia pestis*). The disease reached Egypt via the Red Sea routes, carried by merchant ships transporting large numbers of rats carrying infected fleas, which were the very cause of the disease's spread.

At the time, Clysma was an important port with trade routes linking the entire Mediterranean, which facilitated the spread of the first major pandemic in history.

In 542, the plague reached Constantinople, where it claimed thousands of lives, resulting in a severe economic crisis and undermining the territorial expansion of Emperor Justinian I.

<https://www.medievalists.net/2014/03/red-sea-port-clysma-possible-gate-justinians-plague/>



The sky above Egypt has lost the intense lapis lazuli colour that has always characterised it, taking on a leaden hue that dims and filters the sun's rays.

Anastasios walks through the streets of the harbour, accompanied by his young bride, Theodosia. "The weather is still so gloomy, I just hope it isn't a bad omen." She murmurs worriedly.

Looking down at his feet in search of his own shadow, Anastasios, too, feels uneasy. "This strange chill has blackened the farmland. This year's wheat harvest has been poor, and we, unfortunately, have lost our entire crop: we have nothing to take to Constantinople," he says, clasping his wife's hand.

CONTINUE



As they walk through the streets, they notice some Roman soldiers cutting branches to build a small fire.

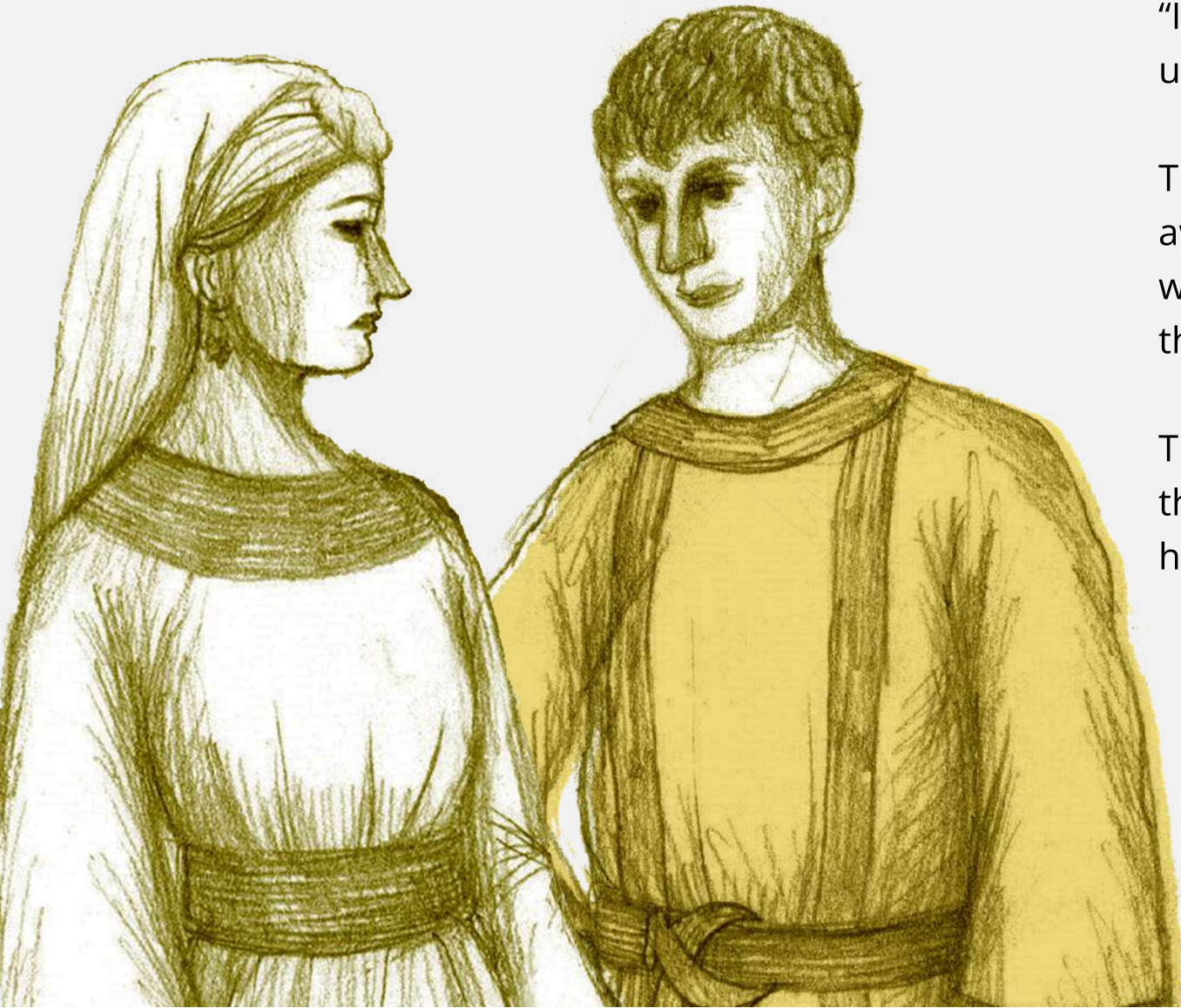
Anastasios and Theodosia approach them, and one of the soldiers turns to Anastasios and says:

"These are difficult times for everyone. If you need work, you can join us."

Frightened, Theodosia clutches her husband's arm. "We are merchants. My husband is not a soldier. Although this year's harvest has been poor, I put my trust in God and..."

"If you join us, you could earn a lot of money," the soldier insists, ignoring her. "We'll be around if you change your mind. We're leaving in a few days."

CONTINUE

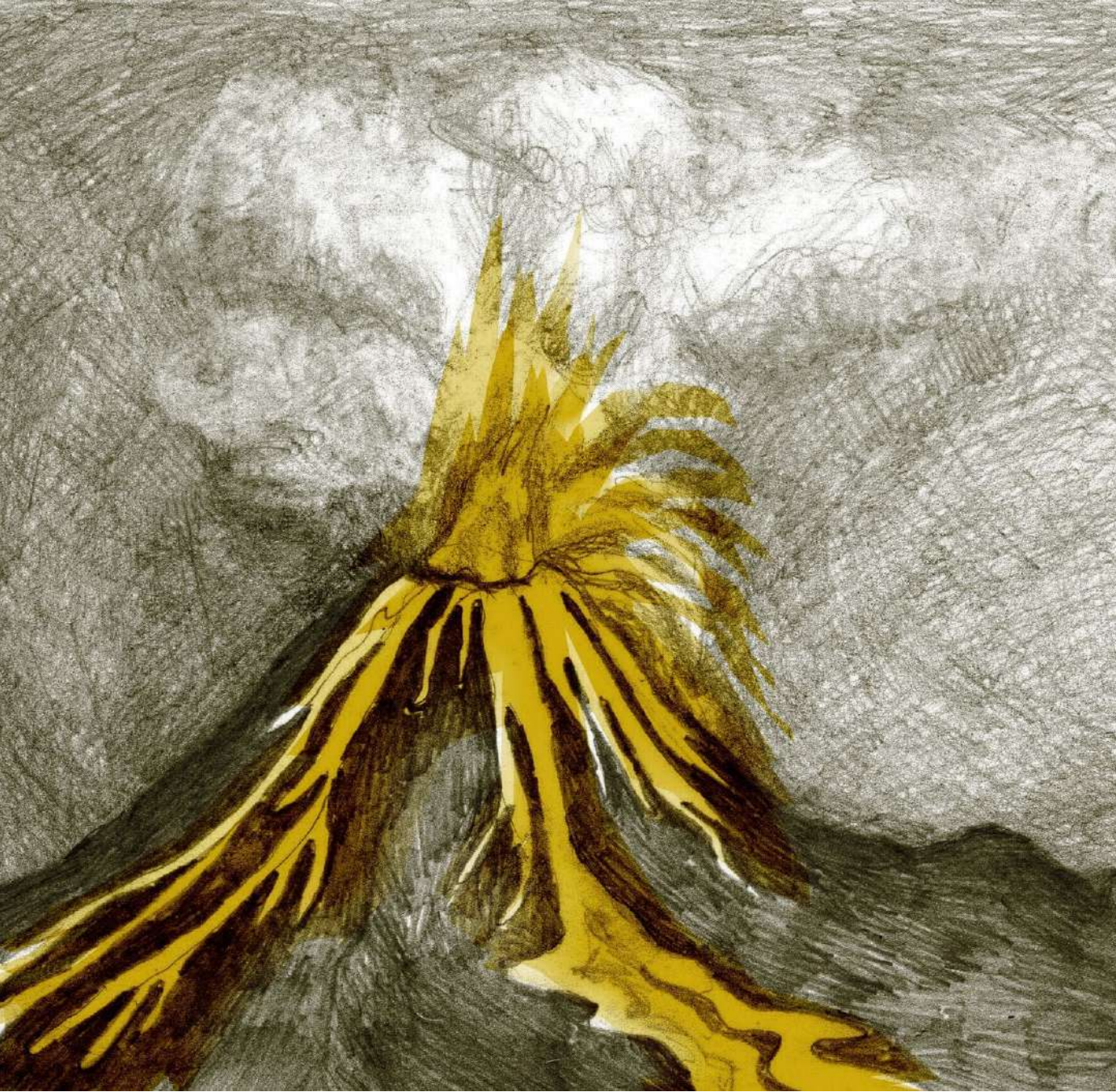


"I'll think about it," says Anastasios, his voice uncertain.

Theodosia clings to him and gently urges him away from the group of soldiers. The couple walk on in silence, each lost in their own thoughts, their hearts heavy with worry.

The leaden sky looms over their lives, following them until, exhausted, they finally lay their heads down in bed.

CONTINUE



That night, Theodosia sleeps restlessly. When she wakes, she has a strange dream to tell.

"I dreamt of a great mountain dotted with small villages... It stood in a land I did not recognise. But it wasn't really a mountain at all, it was a volcano that suddenly erupted with a tremendous explosion and terrible fury! It spewed huge columns of fire, and a gigantic cloud of ash and flames spread across and darkened the entire sky... all the way here."



CONTINUE



Procopius of Caesarea, a historian of the period, describes how for months the sun lost its usual brightness, appearing pale “like the moon”. Evidence of this prolonged dimming has also been found in tree-ring records and polar ice cores. It has been linked to two major volcanic eruptions: the first in 536 and the second, even more powerful, in 540. The exact locations of the volcanoes remain uncertain, although possible sources have been identified in tropical regions and, for the 536 eruption, possibly Iceland. Sulphates and volcanic particles released into the atmosphere reduced the amount of sunlight reaching the Earth’s surface.

The consequences were severe: summer temperatures dropped sharply, contributing to the period of cooling that scholars call the Late Antique Little Ice Age.



"The day grew dark... only the mountain of fire continued to blaze, staining the sky red with rivers of lava flowing down its slopes!" Theodosia trembles as she continues her story, as if gripped by fear - not of what has happened, but of what is yet to come.

"Everything was so vivid and real. I could see a deadly storm of fire descending on the villages, spreading and engulfing everything - even our beloved Clysma!"

Anastasios gently strokes her to reassure her. "It was only a dream, my darling..."

"I don't know... it felt so real. Perhaps it was just a bad omen. And yet, when I think about how strange our sky has been, I can't help wondering whether it is all somehow connected..." she says, closing her eyes and resting her forehead on her husband's shoulder, shaken by one last shiver of fear.

CONTINUE



The next day, as Anastasios walks through the streets of Clysma, he sees the young Roman soldier approaching him.

"I'm Ernack, a Hun commander serving in a Roman military unit," he says, looking Anastasios up and down as if assessing his strength. "I'm recruiting volunteers in Egypt to join the army and fight in Italy against the Goths."

"I'm only a merchant..." Anastasios replies, as if trying to distance himself from the idea. "But I've lost my harvest, and I'm desperate!"

Ernack urges him on. "Join our army and you'll earn the money you need," he says, placing a hand on Anastasios's shoulder.



CONTINUE

Recent scientific research suggests that prolonged periods of drought may have contributed to the intensification of Hunnic raids and pressure on the borders of the Roman Empire. A study by researchers at the University of Cambridge, published in the *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, linked the hot, dry summers of the 5th century to some of the Huns' most devastating attacks.

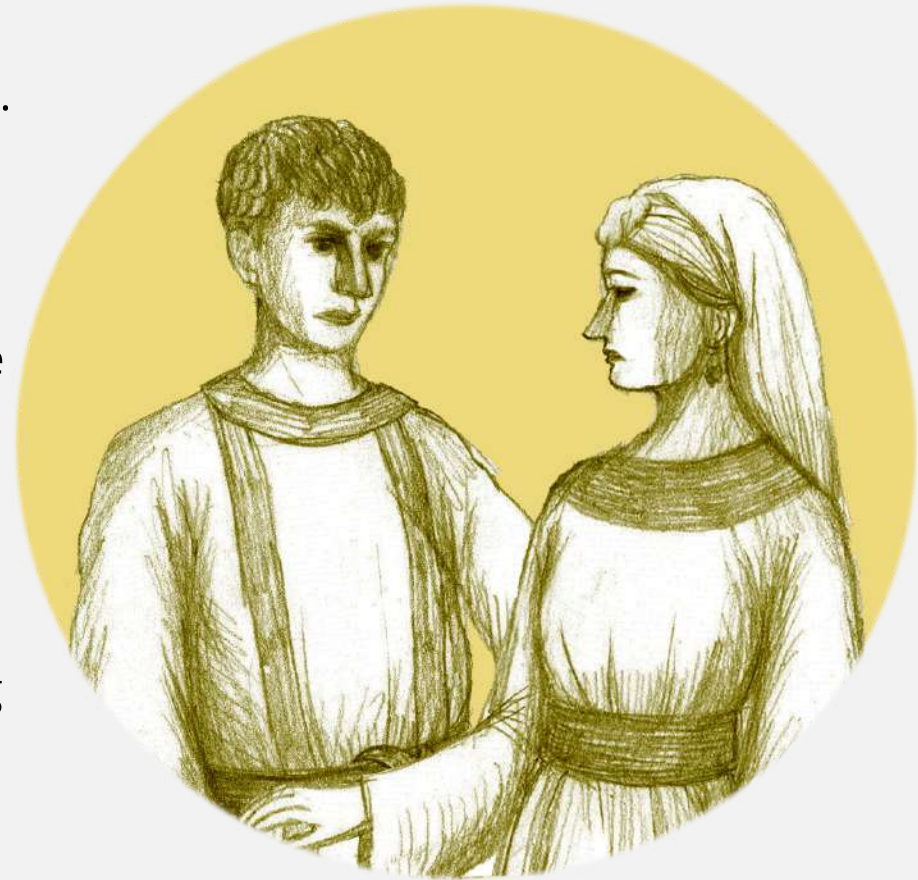
The authors, archaeologist Susanne Hakenbeck and geographer Ulf Büntgen, reached these conclusions by combining historical and archaeological evidence with dendrochronological data. Their analysis drew on 27,080 annually resolved measurements from 21 living and 126 relict oak trees located in areas of what are now the Czech Republic and south-eastern Bavaria. The data revealed severe drought spells in central and eastern Europe during the 430s to 450s AD.

If the historical dating is correct, some of the most devastating Hunnic incursions in 447, 451 and 452 AD took place during extremely dry summers. The researchers suggest that water shortages and reduced agricultural and grazing productivity may have placed increasing pressure on local populations and pastoral groups. Raiding for food, livestock, tribute or access to better grazing land may therefore have been one of several strategies used to cope with these difficult environmental and economic conditions.

Anastasios returns home, full of doubts, and tells her about the meeting and the proposal. Theodosia cannot hold back her tears.

"I don't want you to die in battle!" she says, trying to find an alternative that will keep her husband away from the war. "After all, despite these troubled times, we're lucky to live in Clysma, we could still do business, there are ships setting sail every day..." Anastasios looks at his wife, drinking in her words as if they were delicious nectar.

"Perhaps we could borrow some money," she continues, growing increasingly confident in her idea, "hire a ship with a crew, buy some goods in the Kingdom of Axum and then resell them in Constantinople. With the money we earn, we'll pay back what we've borrowed. I'll come with you," she said, giving her husband a hopeful smile.



CONTINUE

“That’s true,” Anastasios tells her. “We could travel as far as the Kingdom of Axum... and, however costly and dangerous it might be, we could even journey to India to buy food and spices and then resell them.” Theodosia smiles, to her, the war already feels far away...

That night, however, Anastasios cannot sleep. He wrestles with the decision of whether to go to war, where he might find it easier to earn the money they need, or to embark on a sea voyage that carries just as many risks. Theodosia sleeps beside him, unaware of his doubts.

“...perhaps soon, this dreadful weather that has ruined the harvests will be nothing more than a bad memory for everyone,” he murmurs to himself as the first light of dawn begins to appear. It is dawn now, and Anastasios is still unsure which path to take. He feels his future, and Theodosia’s, fraying and fading into uncertainty, like the sky above Clysma.

ANASTASIOS’S CHOICE



He decides to enlist in the army and goes to Italy to fight in the war. Go to page 11



He borrows money and sets off for exotic lands to buy spices. Go to page 14

Anastasios still remembers the last night before his departure, the warmth of his wife's embrace and her tears, and the Egyptian coastline slowly fading from view as the ship sailed away.

Italy is gripped in an icy stranglehold, as if spring had forgotten to awaken, and no one, as far back as anyone can remember, seems to recall a time like this. The camp stretches across the countryside, smoke from the fires rises towards the grey sky, whilst some repair their weapons and others build siege engines.

The soldiers have cut down a few trees to light fires and keep warm, but the cold continues to grip their hearts. Anastasios is used to travelling but not to marching or wielding weapons; he could never have imagined the horror of the battlefields.

The army is heading straight for Rome to reclaim territories once belonging to the Roman Empire, now under the control of the Goths.

CONTINUA

Sitting by the fire, Anastasios is lost in thought, turning a gold coin over in his hands and imagining himself travelling as far as Serica to buy silk cloth for his beloved Theodosia. "I've heard from some Greek merchants that even in the land of the Seres, people are suffering from the same cold as we are," says a man as he sits down beside him. Anastasios looks at him in surprise.

"I can't read your thoughts, you were speaking aloud..." Then, looking at him, the man adds, "I am Procopius of Caesarea, secretary, adviser, and close associate of the great general Belisarius. I accompany the army and record its campaigns." Procopius looks up at the sky. "The weather has changed in a way that none of us can understand."



CONTINUE



PROCOPIUS of Caesarea was a Byzantine historian who was active in the 6th century at the court of Emperor Justinian. He was born in Caesarea in Palestine and held prestigious posts at the imperial court in Constantinople, where he became secretary and legal adviser to General Belisarius, accompanying him on military campaigns in the eastern regions of the empire (Africa and Italy until around 540). In 542, he was certainly in Constantinople, witnessing the terrible plague that struck the city. (De bellis, II, XXII–XXIII); Procopius was the author of an important historiographical work divided into eight books, including the *De bellis*, completed in 554, in which he recounts, in great detail, the military campaigns waged by the Byzantine army against the Persians in the East (Books I–II), the Vandals in Africa (books III–IV) and the Ostrogoths in Italy (books V–VIII), providing valuable information.

<https://www.livius.org/articles/person/procopius/>

<https://topostext.org/work/666>



Anastasios listens, but his thoughts of Theodosia and his former life keep him from responding. Procopius smiles as he looks at the young man, his eyes still reeling from the battle that has just ended. “We have a long march ahead of us to Rome; outside, Witige’s army is laying siege to it. But I have great faith in Belisarius and his strategy.” He says this to cheer him up, “however, I’m not sure this is the path for you,” he adds.

Anastasios looks at him in surprise; he has only heard half of what he said. The idea of facing more battles, perhaps for years on end, frightens him. The pay is good, but his homesickness and longing for Theodosia make him have second thoughts.

ANASTASIOS’S CHOICE



Finds a way to escape and returns to Egypt.
Go to page 25



Stays in Italy and continues the war. Go to
page 17



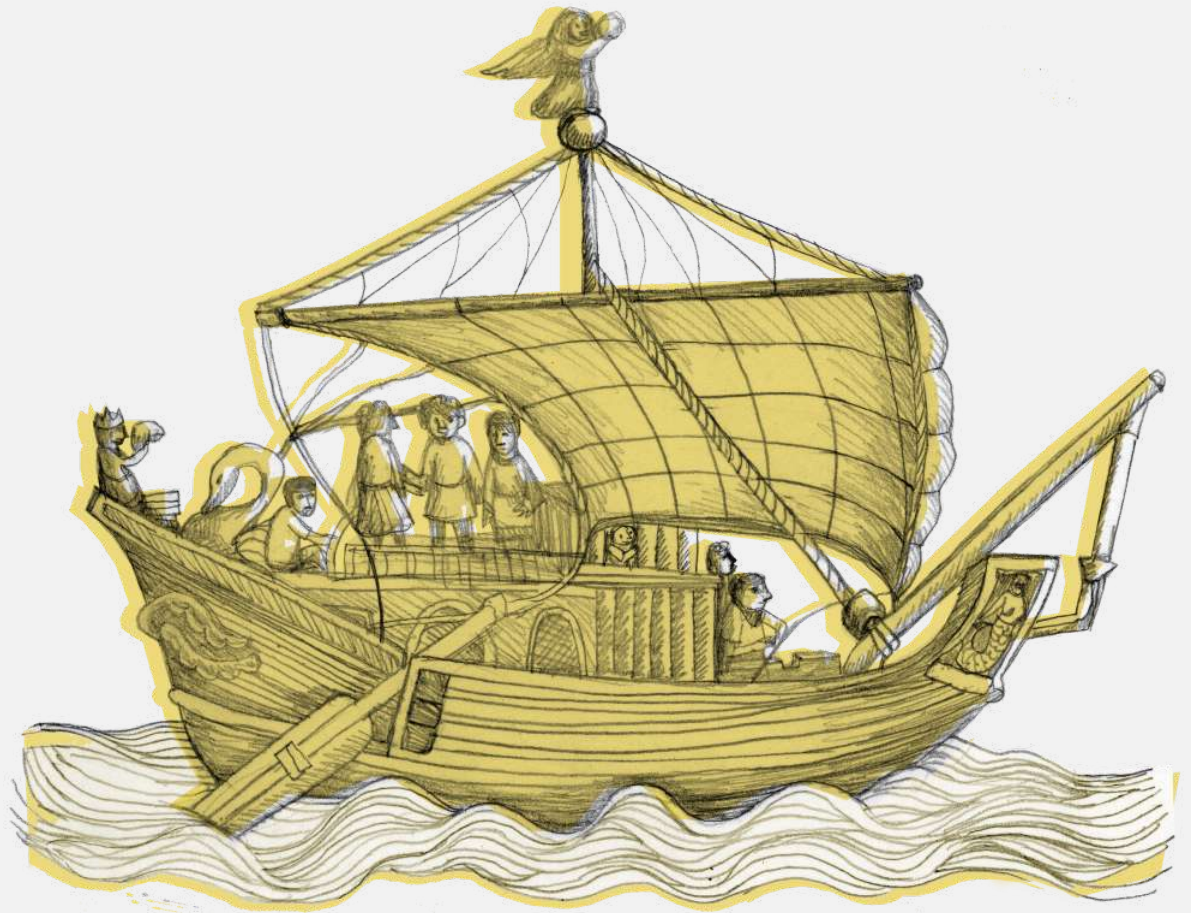
The long Gothic War between the Byzantines and the Goths at the gates of Rome had its first phase between 536 and 538 AD. Both peoples shared the same objective: to conquer what remained of the Western Roman Empire. Belisarius, a general in the Byzantine army, had set out from Constantinople and landed in Sicily with the aim of reaching Rome in 535 AD.

The general and his troops entered the capital via the Porta Asinara and remained there for about a year. In 537, the Goths, led by Vitiges, set up camp in seven separate encampments at the city gates, encircling the entire northern half of the Roman walls (from Porta San Pancrazio to Porta Tiburtina) and cutting off the aqueducts to prevent the water supply.

Belisarius had 5,000 men at his disposal, whilst the Goths numbered over 30,000, although Procopius even puts the figure at 150,000.

With the loan, the two young merchants managed to acquire a sturdy ship, with a broad, rounded hull large enough to hold the cargo, and a capable crew to handle the sails. The ship cuts through the calm waters of the Red Sea, almost without waves or swells, heading towards the port of Adulis in the Kingdom of Axum. Anastasios stands at the bow of the ship, braving the spray and feeling immensely happy to be on this journey. "From Adulis, once the cargo is loaded, we could sail to Constantinople, or perhaps even farther afield..."

The sea laps against the gleaming coastline, made of rock that seems to sparkle like stardust. As they draw nearer, the port of Adulis comes into view, crowded with ships from distant lands.



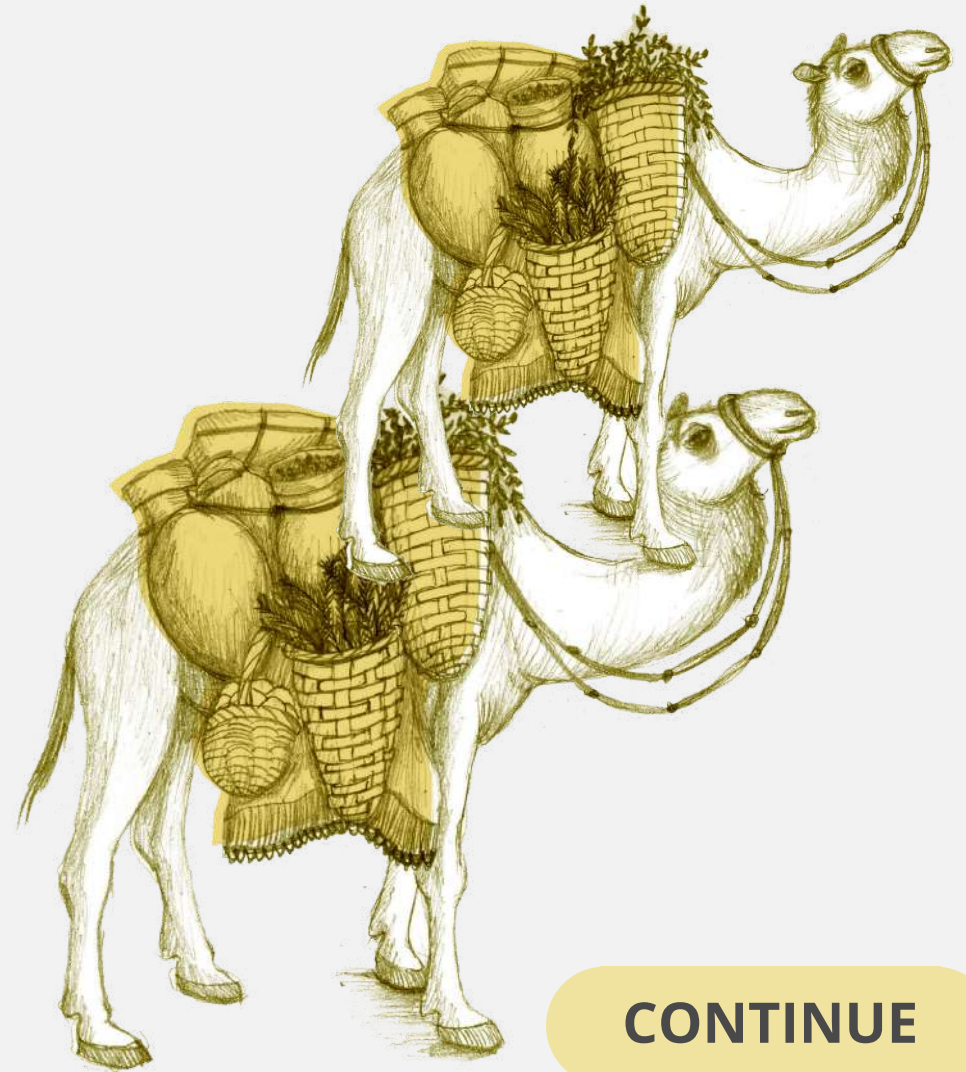
CONTINUE

Anastasios and his wife exchange smiles. The harbour is teeming with life: people from many different places, slaves, merchants and sailors. As soon as they disembark, they meet some old friends.

"I want to thank God for our journey," says Theodosia as she makes her way to the nearest church.

Anastasios is already negotiating the purchase of the first goods. A merchant unloads spices and myrrh from his camels; their scent mingles with that of the sea, the animals and the bustling life of the harbour.

Despite how far they have travelled, the leaden, gloomy sky that hung over their heads in Egypt seems to have followed them all the way here. Rain has been scarce, but for now the harvests and food reserves in Adulis seem to be holding up.



CONTINUE

While haggling over the prices of the goods to be loaded, Anastasios listens to a monk speaking to some men sitting on fish traps beside a fishing boat.

"Cosmas, you've travelled far. What would you advise?"

"Perhaps I'd tell you to head towards Aden, or maybe even farther, to Taprobane, which I visited many, many years ago..." replies a monk whose age is difficult to guess.

Theodosia overhears the man's words.

"Perhaps, instead of stopping, we could simply keep sailing from port to port and make a living by buying goods and reselling them..." says the woman, gazing into the distance. "I'd love to visit unknown lands, where the sky still has the ancient colour of lapis lazuli."



ANASTASIOS'S CHOICE



He decides to stay in the Kingdom of Axum.
Go to page 22



Continues journey in search of fortune. Go
to page 33



Cosmas Indicopleustes was an Egyptian merchant (probably from Alexandria). Around the year 522 AD, he undertook a long voyage that took him to Ethiopia (East Africa), via the Arabian and Persian Gulfs, to the coasts of India, and to Taprobane (Ceylon).

It is to this journey that he owes his name, which literally means "Indian navigator". On his return home, he retired from trade; he may have become a monk, but we know for certain that he devoted himself (between 535 and 547) to writing a text entitled *Christian Topography*, in which he defends the biblical conception of the cosmos against Greek cosmology.

The tales of Belisarius's invincibility had allayed Anastasios's fear of battle. Ernack took him under his wing, teaching him the art of warfare practised by the Huns and transforming him into a formidable horseman: swift and powerful, skilled with bow and arrow.

Upon arriving in Italy, Ernack's army had joined forces with another, made up of men from Samnium, Naples and even Thrace, and they were now heading towards Ostia to support Belisarius, who had been defending Rome and its inhabitants for over a year. To wear down the population, the Goths had cut off the aqueducts and attempted to contaminate the river by throwing corpses into it.

During the long march that brought them to Rome, they passed through abandoned villages and fallow fields; in the last one, before reaching Rome, Anastasios greets an old man sitting on the steps of his house. The man shakes his head and answers a question no one has asked him; there is no anger in his voice, only weariness: "We no longer know what to fear – whether it is the harvests that keep failing... hunger, or the armies..."

Famine, hardship and the cold seemed to be taking their toll on Rome just as relentlessly, in what was a veritable war of arms and attrition.

CONTINUE

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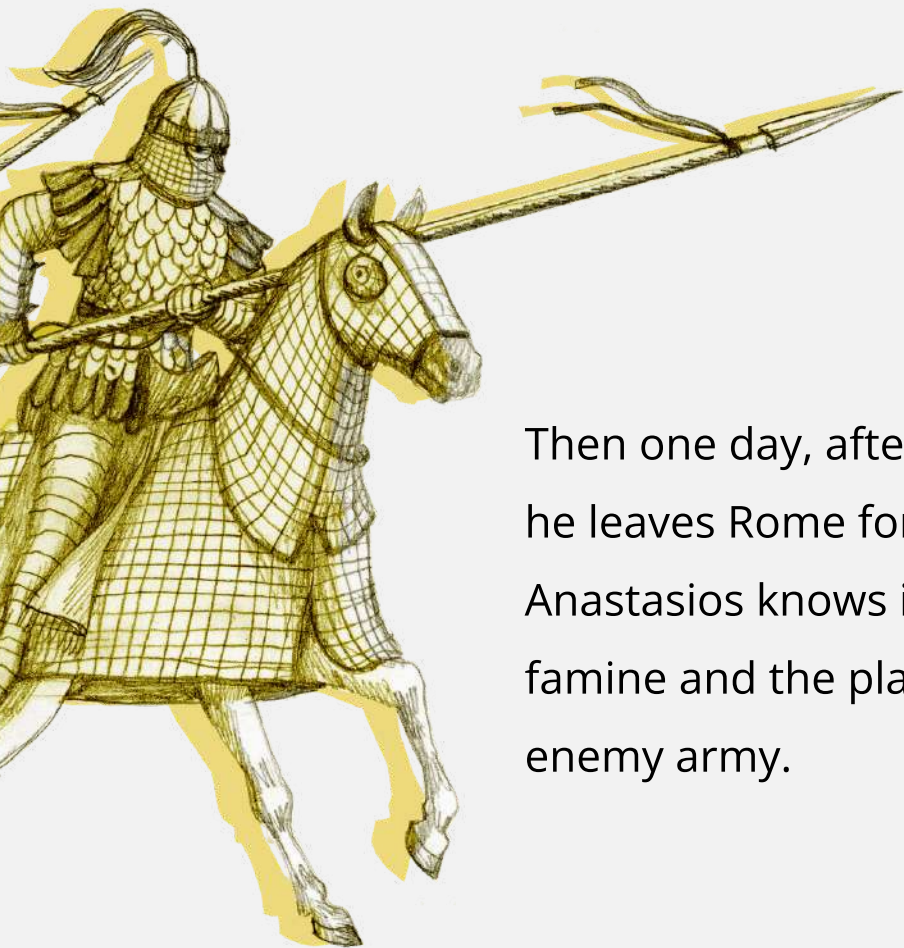
Winter, with its cold cloak, is made all the more bitter by the very same leaden sky that hangs over the battles that rage day after day. Belisarius and his soldiers, however, face the enemy, securing victory after victory.

The Ostrogoths use every weapon at their disposal – onagers, battering rams, tortoise formations, ballistas, wooden towers and bundles of brushwood to fill the moats – and hurl stones at the walls, but the Byzantine army holds firm.

Then comes the moment when they make their move: the cataphracts – horses and riders entirely clad in iron plate armour – like a single ferocious entity descending upon the enemy army, they surge from the ramparts, sowing terror in their wake.



CONTINUE



The first wave strikes the Gothic cavalry with their long kontario lances, then the archers arrive.

Anastasios spurred his horse on; he did not think, but carried out his movements like the perfect war machine he had become. When the wave of horsemen withdrew, it seemed as though they had vanished into thin air, but behind them they left a long trail of dead.

Then one day, after yet another attack, Witiges's army is routed and defeated, and he leaves Rome for good with his troops. Whilst the exhausted population rejoices, Anastasios knows in his heart that it is not solely down to military might. Hunger, famine and the plague have contributed in equal measure to decimating the enemy army.

CONTINUE



Belisarius, however, wants to pursue Witiges and defeat him once and for all. The camp is in turmoil; the soldiers woke at dawn to prepare for the long march.

Anastasios is weary of this life; he misses his wife. He has seen too many people die, and now that the plague is also spreading through the city, he feels new doubts creeping into his mind.

Ernack secures his bow on his horse and looks at his friend: 'What are you thinking?' he asks.

"I just wish I could close my eyes and go back to my old life – to the sea, to Constantinople, to the grain trade," replies Anastasios.

CONTINUE



“But that’s not all; I miss my wife and Egypt. I haven’t heard from her in ages,” he adds, letting out a long sigh.

“Belisario still needs us,” says Ernack curtly, as he tends to his horse; as if there could be no room in his life for anything other than war.

ANASTASIOS’S CHOICE



Stays in Italy and
pursues the Goths
as far as Ravenna.
Go to page 38



Returns to Egypt.
Go to page 25

Anastasios and his wife, despite their initial difficulties, managed to build a new life for themselves in Adulis, where they lived peacefully. Every now and then, a ship returning from a distant land would arrive in the harbour, sometimes bringing news of wars and famines...

Five years have passed and even life in Adulis has become difficult; as time has gone by, Theodosia has grown restless, thinking of her elderly parents living in Pelusium, where she spent her childhood; not a day goes by without her remembering the gentleness of the Nile, the rustling of the papyrus in the wind, and the Coptic churches and monasteries reflected in the waters teeming with life. Her longing to return grows ever more intense, almost as if it were a necessity.

Just as when she had dreamt of the mountain of fire, Theodosia feels tormented by something she cannot explain. The rumours arriving on the ships – of famines and deadly diseases – drive her to want to return.

Drawing on his connections, Anastasios secures a place on a ship, and having sold their house, he and his wife prepare to sail up the Red Sea towards Clysma.

CONTINUE



The ship, with its cargo, leaves the harbour in the morning as the sun rises. A long journey of at least three weeks lies ahead of them. Anastasios looks out at the city that has seen them, happy, disappear over the horizon.

Later, whilst Theodosia sleeps, like most of the crew, Anastasios gazes at the starry sky and the black sea over which the ship glides. In the darkness, he has not noticed a man and a few rats, which have crept up from the holds and are moving silently. "Trade offers us opportunities," says the voice in the darkness, "but ships also carry unwanted passengers... the sea sometimes connects far more than cities do."

Anastasios feels a shiver run down his spine; he shakes his head as if to banish those words from his mind.

CONTINUE

A few days later, when the ship docks in the harbour and the men unload the sacks full of goods, those words echo once more in Anastasios's mind. Two rats scurry between Theodosia's feet, causing her to scream in fright.

The city seemed transformed to him; people looked at one another with suspicion. "Loimos, loimos," the Greeks whispered... "The plague," said the inhabitants of Clysma, "it has reached many cities, from Pelusium to Clysma..."

The terrible disease is laying siege to vast areas; it has arrived by sea on ships from the kingdom of Axum, ships laden not only with goods but also with a contagion that is spreading rapidly. October is almost over, but the epidemic is only just beginning.

Anastasios shivers again; he feels his fever rising. 'Perhaps I am ill!' he says desperately, looking at Theodosia.



ANASTASIOS'S CHOICE

⇒ Anastasios decides to go to hospital. Go to page 41

⇒ Anastasios stays at home with his wife. Go to page 29



In a hot October of 541 (the fourteenth year of Justinian's reign (527–565)), the plague arrived at the port of Pelusium, situated at the eastern mouth of the Nile Delta. The numerous vessels sailing between this port and the inner reaches of the Red Sea carried a different cargo on board: that of contagion and death.

In all likelihood, the disease came from the Kingdom of Axum (present-day Ethiopia – as recorded in the writings of the Byzantine historian Evagrius Scholasticus, c. 536–594) – spreading due to the presence of numerous colonies of rats in the city and the harbour.

From the city of Pelusium, the plague soon spread throughout Egypt, reaching Syria and Palestine, until, in 542, it arrived in Constantinople, where, in just four months, it caused the death of almost a third of the population, as reported by the Byzantine historian Procopius (c. 500–565), figures which, however, are still questioned by researchers and scientists today.

For over two centuries, the pandemic continued to claim victims and later came to be known as the Plague of Justinian.



Leaving the army is not an easy decision, but Anastasios feels that that life is not for him. Ernack may well regard him as a deserter, or perhaps, like the other soldiers, he will simply nod silently, pretending not to see him as he walks away.

The journey home seems to drag on, as if the waiting were stretching out the days and hours. Along the way, he is accompanied by the same gloomy sky, the fallow fields, the hungry and weary people, and the same uncertainty. The final stretch at sea before reaching Clysma was the most difficult, torn between hopes and fears.

In the harbour there are fewer ships, fewer boats, and the warehouses are empty. Anastasios heads home. Sitting on the steps, Theodosia looks at him in disbelief; joy paralyses her, and she waits for him to come to her. As she embraces him, she barely has the strength to whisper:
“You’re back.”

CONTINUE

Day and night seem not to be enough to recount everything he has been through... the horror of war is too great to pour out into his wife's heart, and Anastasios speaks of Rome, of the famine and of the sky, which even up there has the same colour and the same pain.

Then Theodosia, having regained her composure, tells him that a strange illness has been spreading through the city for months now... her description brings to Anastasios's mind the many dead he has seen in the villages and amongst the soldiers in the army.



Sometimes it seems as though fate is chasing us, or that it has simply arranged to meet us in the very place where we thought we would be safe. Anastasios was struck by the first symptoms a few days after his arrival; his body, racked by fever, became covered in buboes, and his mind was lost in dreams and delirium.

CONTINUE



The Plague of Justinian, named after the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I, began in 541 AD and, according to ancient historians, claimed as many as 10,000 lives a day. The disease (*Yersinia pestis*), which arrived via merchant ships in Mediterranean ports, spread whilst the Greek-Gothic War was raging in Italy.

The first outbreaks occurred in Egypt, then a Byzantine territory, from where the plague then spread northwards via merchant ships and caravans, reaching Syria, Palestine and eventually Constantinople (541 and 542). It was not only a cause of death but also of a social and economic crisis that engulfed the entire Empire. Cities, where populations were denser and conditions filthier, facilitated the spread of the disease. Although there are no definitive figures, it has been estimated that by the mid-6th century, the plague had claimed the lives of 25 - 30 million people. The plague triggered a crisis in trade, which ground to a halt, severely compromised public services and led to increasingly meagre harvests. The plague also affected the course of the Greco-Gothic War, slowing down military operations.

Wars, invasions, famines and the spread of Christianity had scattered ancient medical knowledge; the age-old knowledge associated with the use of medicinal plants seemed to have been forgotten, with people relying instead on prayer and chance. However, it was precisely during this century, thanks to monasticism, that an empirical pharmacopoeia began to spread, drawing on the ingredients found in monastic gardens to create healing remedies.

Theodosia weeps and prays before the icons, convinced that her prayers can help her husband's recovery, but Anastasios shows no sign of improvement. One day, Theodosia resolves to seek help at the monastery, where a healing centre has been set up to treat both the poor and the sick alike.

The smell of bodies mingles with that of burnt herbs, in a futile attempt to purify the air.



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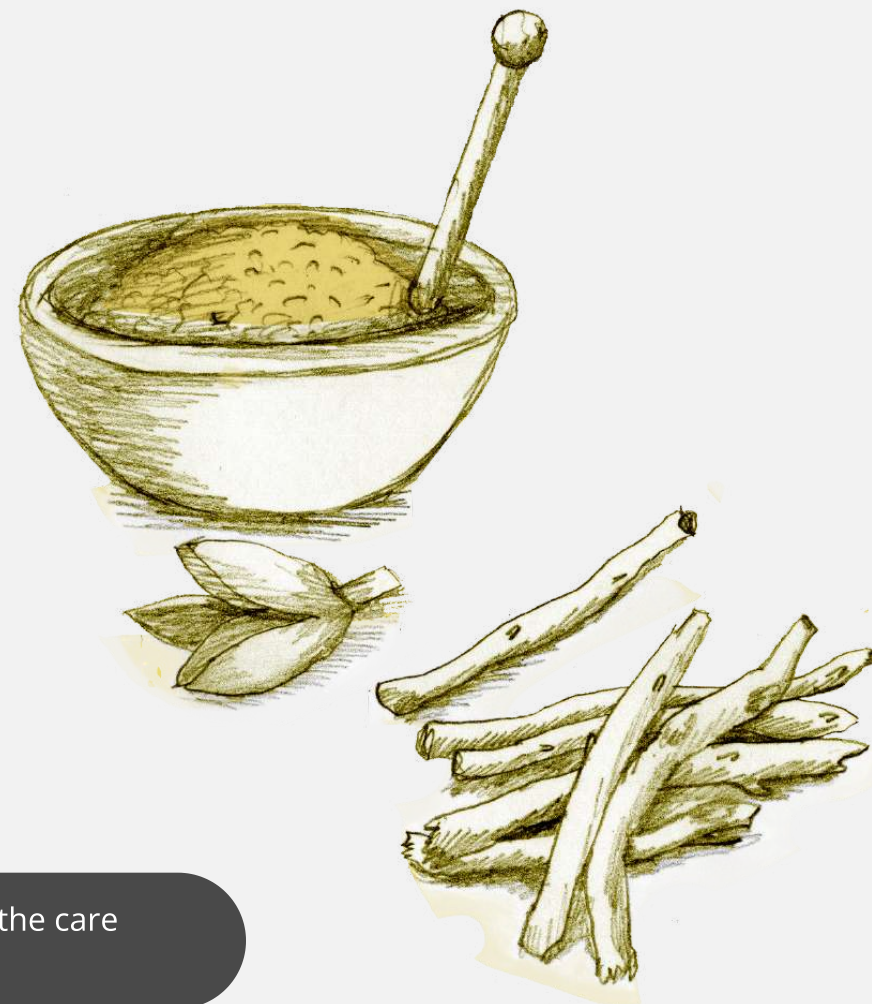
The description of the symptoms of the disease is once again attributed to Procopius of Caesarea. Those affected were primarily tormented by the appearance of purulent buboes in the armpits and groin, but also on the neck. These were followed by fever, paralysis of the limbs, hallucinations and delirium. Other symptoms included dysentery, minor skin haemorrhages and widespread joint pain; the mortality rate was extremely high.

Medical knowledge at the time did not allow people to understand either how the disease spread or what treatments might be effective. The only remedies employed were limited to hot baths, in an attempt to expel the “humours” considered “bad” from the patients’ bodies.

Theodosia begs the monks to visit her and the following day, keeping his promise, a young monk goes to see Anastasios.

"I've brought some herbal teas and decoctions," he says, looking concerned despite his faith, "however, it would be better if Anastasios came to us... we cannot guarantee his recovery, but if he stays, he might infect you too."

Anastasios, despite his fever, listens to the monk's words.



ANASTASIOS'S CHOICE



Anastasios, persuaded by his wife, stays at home. Go to page 29



Anastasios decides to go to the care home. Go to page 41



Theodosia burns herbs to ward off bad air, just as she had seen the monks do, and prepares herbal teas.

His illness has prevented the young man from making his own decisions; he allowed himself to be persuaded to stay, but as the days go by, his condition is getting worse.

He can no longer move his legs and struggles to clench his fists; the skin around the boils, despite the herbal compresses, is growing darker day by day.



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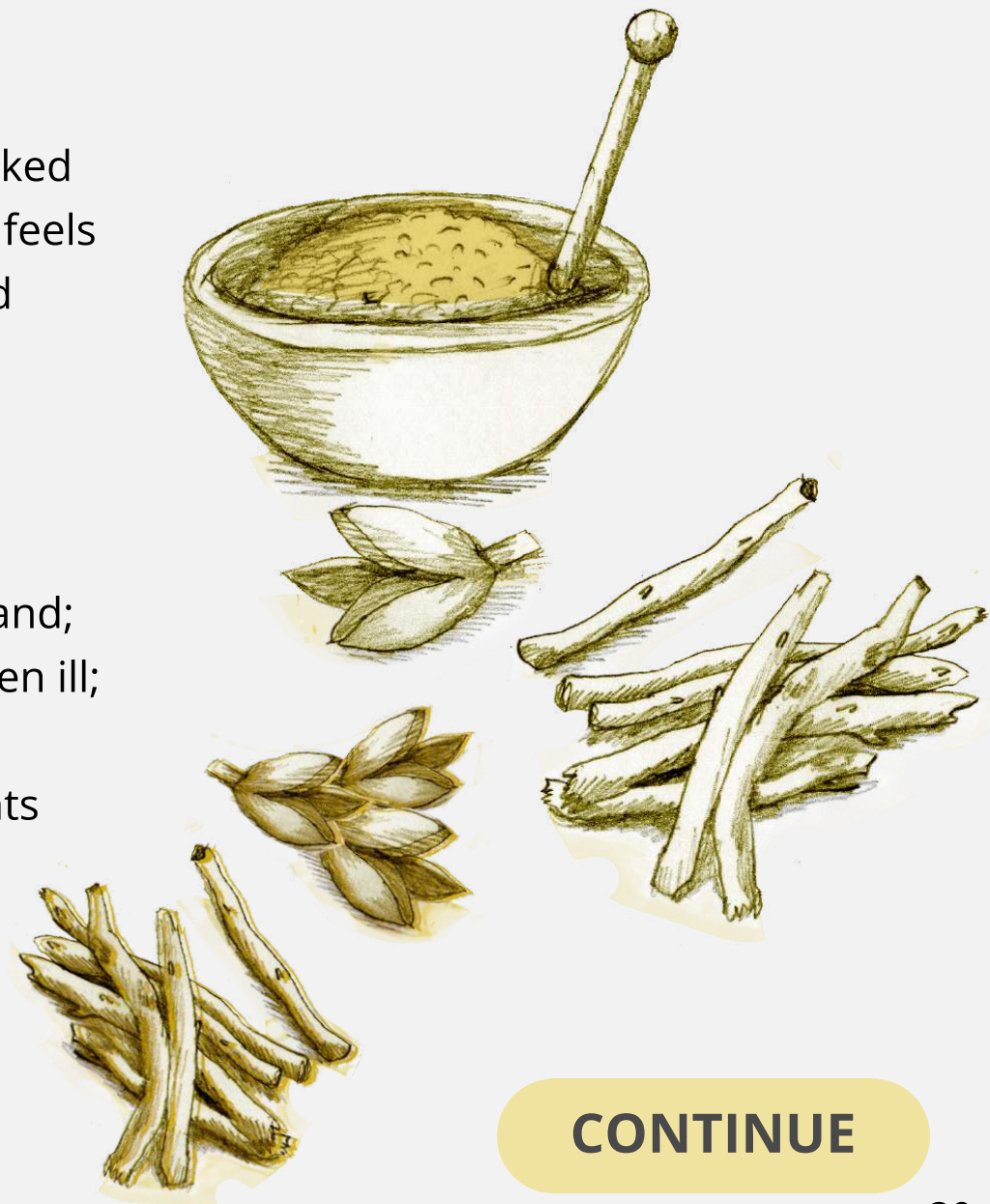
According to Procopius, some Byzantine doctors tried to understand what was happening, drawing on the teachings of Hippocrates and their own knowledge: they performed autopsies on the bodies and examined the buboes (located in the various lymph nodes, under the armpits, on the neck and in the groin).

Their battle, however, was lost from the outset, as antibiotics had not yet been discovered.

One morning, Theodosia wakes up with a fever, her body racked with chills and her head feeling as though it might burst; she feels tired and, touching her neck, discovers that a boil has formed there.

What the monk had told her had, unfortunately, come true.

Theodosia weeps in secret, so as not to be seen by her husband; she has not had the courage to tell him that she, too, has fallen ill; as long as her strength allows, she carries on with the same rituals, gestures and daily chores: she burns herbs and anoints her own body and her husband's with scented oil; kneeling before the icons of Saint Anastasia of Sirmium and the Virgin Mary, she prays.



CONTINUE

As the days go by, however, her words become muddled; the fever makes it difficult for her to remember or think, whilst the fear and pain she feels for Anastasios and for herself tighten around her throat.

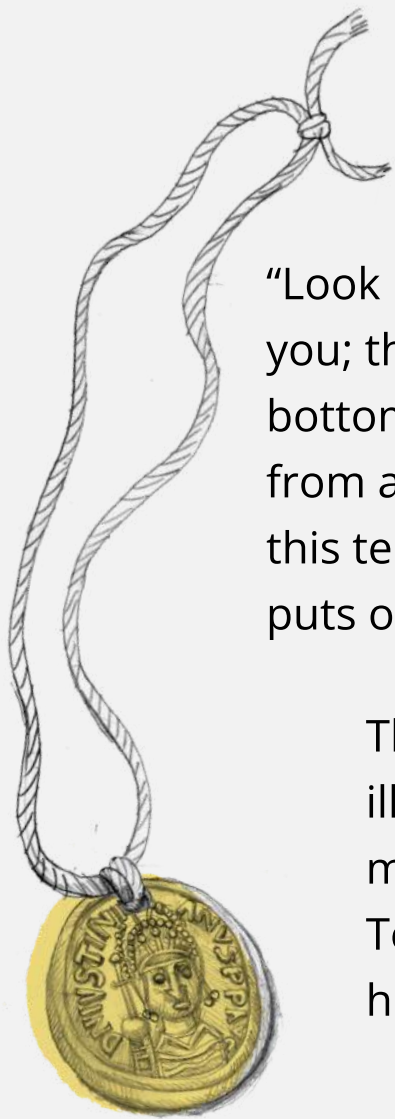
She does not understand the inscrutable ways of fate; in her delirium, she tries to retrace her choices, but sometimes life chooses for itself.

There are events and situations that dictate their own course, and sometimes the choices we make, driven by fear or perhaps selfishness, lead us down paths from which there is no turning back.

Theodosia firmly believed she could cure the plague, but that was not to be.



CONTINUE



In a rare moment of clarity, Anastasios one day asked his wife to fetch his saddlebag.

“Look inside...” he says to her in what little voice he has left. “There’s something I made for you; the illness made me forget to give it to you. I made it with my first pay...” From the bottom of his bag, he pulls out a small parcel, inside which she finds a gold coin hanging from a cord. “A token of my love, or perhaps an amulet, which I hope will protect you from this terrible illness,” he says in a faint whisper before slipping back into delirium. Theodosia puts on the necklace, even though she knows the amulet can no longer do anything for her.

Then everything comes crashing down; Anastasios lies lifeless, his body disfigured by illness. Theodosia feels she has no other choice and lies down beside the body of the man she loves, clinging to him as she waits for death to lead her before her God. Tenderly caressing Anastasios’s face, she takes the coin hanging round his neck into her hand, closing her eyes for the last time on the day.

THE END

Anastasios approaches, looking curious. Cosmas looks at the newcomer. "Are you a traveller?" he asks.

"I'm a merchant," says Anastasios, "I've heard you've travelled round the world..."



"No travelling round – the world is a table,*" Cosmas interrupts him, "with its long side running east to west, with expanses of water such as the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea which you sailed across to reach here... and then the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea and the Ocean. If you walk westwards, you'll find a steep mountain, behind which the sun and the stars are hidden... a host of angels lead them there every evening."

Anastasios looks at him doubtfully, but the old man continues his description unperturbed: "At the edges of the world stand four vertical walls, which rise, curving upwards to form the vault of the sky, like the ceiling of a room. The sky is divided into two parts by the Earth up to the firmament; there is a sort of false ceiling there, and that is where we live together with the angels... below, on the other hand, lie the seas and continents..."

CONTINUE



There are two manuscripts of Cosmas Indicopleustes' work dating from the 11th century, both preserved in Italy: one in the Vatican Library and the other in the Laurentian Library in Florence.

The texts are accompanied by a rich and fascinating collection of illustrations. In the image opposite, taken from the manuscript of the *Topographia Christiana*, we see a drawing depicting the 'tabernacle' – that is, Cosmas's conception of the Earth – inspired by the Book of Exodus (25:8–9).



In the background, two Suns can be seen, intended to explain the varying lengths of day and night depending on the seasons. As described in this account, the Sun is accompanied by angels behind the narrow summit of the mountain.

<https://www.festivaldelmedioevo.it/cosma-indicopleuste-il-cielo-in-una-stanza/>

“Incredible,” murmurs Anastasios in amazement, “but Pythagoras, Aristotle, or Claudius Ptolemy all said that...”

“Nonsense,” replies Cosmas, “nonsense that I too am aware of, but as a good Christian, I believe it is my duty to believe in a world different from that of the pagans. The earth is flat.”

Anastasios walks away, thanking the old monk and shaking his head in doubt, but Theodosia seems fascinated by the man’s ideas.

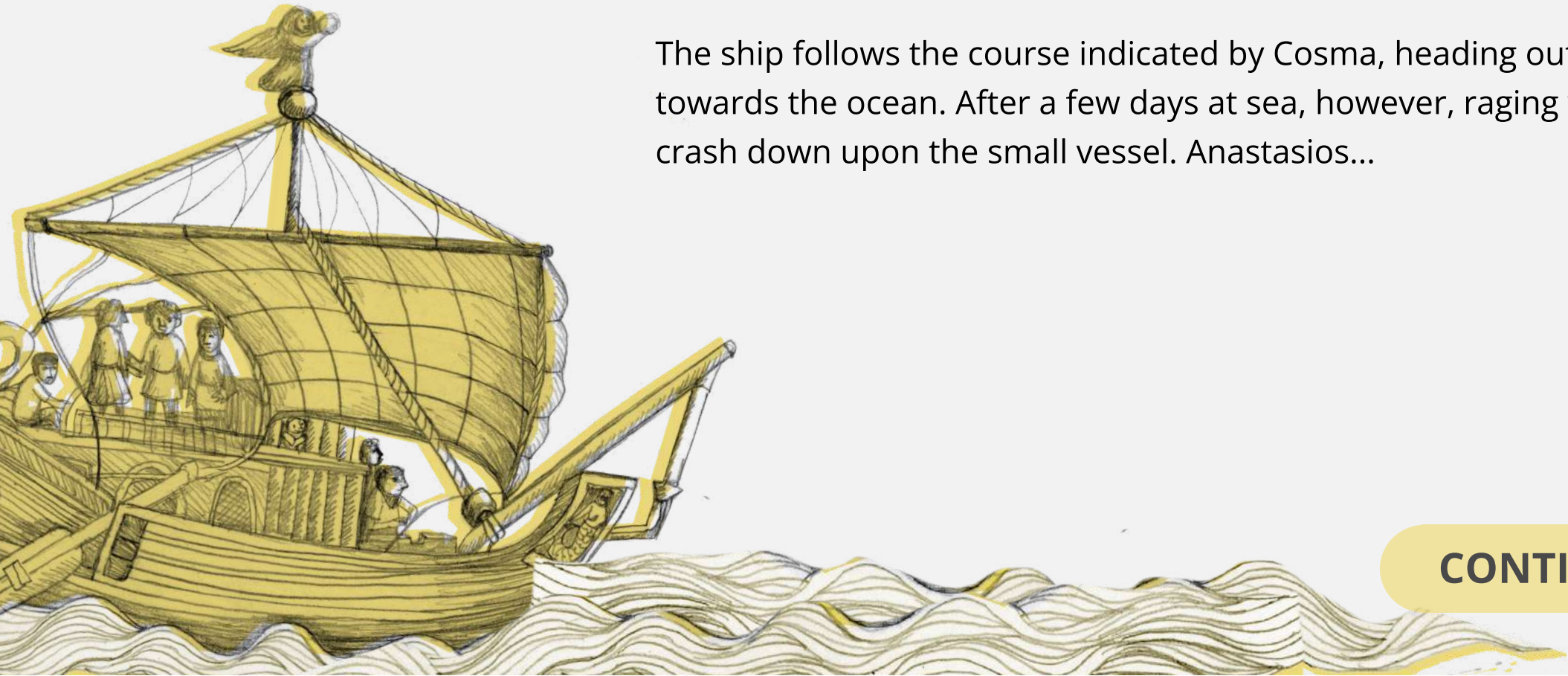
“We could follow his map to confirm how the cosmos and the Earth correspond to the Holy Scriptures... or perhaps even reach the antipodes, where people live upside down...”

CONTINUE

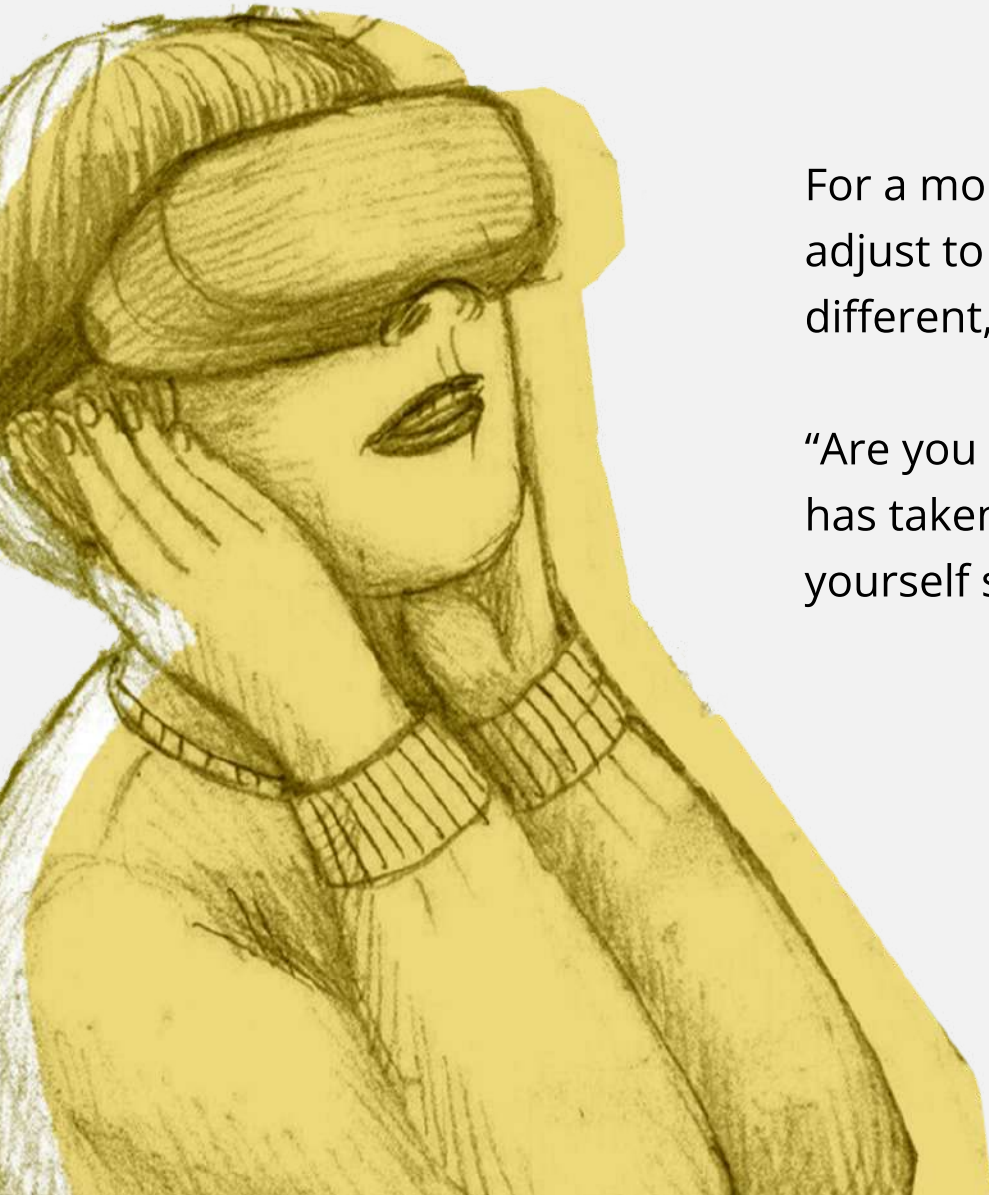
A few days later, the two young merchants' ship set sail from the port of Adulis, heading towards unknown horizons.

Anastasios felt himself trembling, whilst Theodosia seemed to have no doubts. She had repeated Cosmas's words time and again, about how good Christians should not believe what the pagans believe.

The ship follows the course indicated by Cosma, heading out towards the ocean. After a few days at sea, however, raging waves crash down upon the small vessel. Anastasios...



CONTINUE



For a moment, Roberto feels his body floating, he struggles to adjust to the light and the reality of the room, which seems different, larger. The professor is sitting behind her desk.

“Are you all right?” she asks, concerned, seeing that Roberto has taken off the headset too quickly. “You need to give yourself some time to settle in.”

CONTINUE

The boy is breathing heavily and beads of sweat are glistening on his forehead. "This story is so strange, there are ways of thinking and seeing things that confuse me..."

"I understand," says the professor, "we're talking about a distant historical period..."

"Yes, but I think I've grasped your point," he adds more confidently, "to make us realise that our choices, when dictated solely by personal interests, or perhaps based on incorrect information, can't lead to anything good... we must think things through, weigh up the risks before choosing, and above all, get our information from the right sources..."

"Yes, Roberto, that's exactly right! Let's wait for your classmates to finish their journey too, and then we'll discuss it together."

CONTINUE

Anastasios mounted his horse and set off alongside his close friend. He had realised that there was no longer any room for dreams in his life as a soldier; Belisarius had triumphed over his heart and his doubts. The sky remains gloomy, obscuring the sun and making it pale, and looms over the villages and the city, stifling daily life. Farming is becoming increasingly difficult, supplies are running low, whilst the plague spreads everywhere, claiming victims; Anastasios no longer thinks of his former life.

Months turn into years, Egypt is far away, as is the memory of Theodosia; Anastasios has followed Belisarius to Ravenna, where Witige had found refuge. However, the era of victories seems to have come to an end; the new king of the Goths, Totila, more cunning and capable, battle after battle, is recapturing the cities that had been conquered.



CONTINUE

Anastasios no longer has any doubts about where he belongs or which path to take, and together with Ernack they set off towards the new front: the city of Cesena.

Anastasios feels restless as he rides and fires arrows at the enemy army, glancing back from time to time to see where Ernack, his lifelong friend, is. He searches for him amongst the jumble of bodies and horses locked in battle but cannot see him; it is just a moment's distraction, and a spear pierces him – he feels it penetrate deep into his side. The impact is violent and knocks him from his horse.

Anastasios lies on the ground; he feels the life ebbing from him. The sounds of battle, the shouts and the clang of swords, fade away; everything falls silent. He looks up at the sky above him, a gloomy sky that grows ever darker, as if night had suddenly fallen.



CONTINUE

The war rages on, bringing further death and destruction, abandoned fields and meagre harvests that force families to flee their homes... in an endless chain of grief and misfortune.

On the other side of the sea, Theodosia has been waiting for his return, fighting her own battles: against the sky that blocks out the sun's rays, against food shortages and the plague that had even reached Egypt. For everything is connected, and every choice leads to a life, to a change from which we often cannot turn back.

THE END

After the fever, Anastasios's body began to break out in buboes that swelled rapidly before suddenly deflating. Fearing that his wife might also fall ill, Anastasios, despite her pleas, decided one morning to leave home and go to the monks.

Next to the great church clad in precious marble, where Anastasios had once entered countless times to pray, a hospice for the poor and strangers had been built, which also took in the sick.

Many lie there in agony; some, like him, are covered in large buboes that are deflating, whilst others, the more unfortunate ones, have their bodies covered in purulent swellings that numb their limbs, leading to the paralysis of the entire body and, soon after, to death..



CONTINUE

Anastasios sees men and women in agony, dazed and confused as if they had lost touch with reality.

During the long nights he spends awake because of the pain caused by his buboes, he hears their cries, their disjointed phrases and ramblings; he himself becomes lost in his own hallucinations.

The sick are immersed in hot water to alleviate their suffering and expel from the body the “humours” that appear to be the cause of the illness; herbs are burnt in censers, serving more to mask bodily odours than to cure.



CONTINUE



Anastasios does not know whether he will recover, because there is no real cure, other than to keep one's distance and bury the dead in mass graves, or even in fortified towers...



It seems that chance alone decides who is to survive, and who is to die.

Anastasios is among the first. Although he is still weak and frightened, he decides to stay and help the sick who arrive at the hospice every day. Together with others who, like him, have recovered, he assists the monks and doctors who work tirelessly, cleaning wounds or simply offering comfort.

Months pass and he finally returns home, where Theodosia is waiting for him. The fresh sea air and his wife's embrace ease his weariness.

CONTINUE



The dead, like the sick, soon became a problem. The bodies were dragged outside the city walls and, after being counted, were buried in mass graves. Some were taken to the other side of the Golden Horn by boats and barges. Whilst the Empire initially managed to contain the emergency, the situation soon became untenable, as there were more dead than living people capable of dealing with them. Justinian ordered the corpses to be crammed in wherever possible, not only in mass graves but also by requisitioning tombs and private properties.

Together they watch the sun plunge into the sea at Clysma; Anastasios suddenly feels an overwhelming sense of serenity and love for life welling up within him.

A few men disembark from a ship arriving from Constantinople. One of them raises an arm in greeting, and the man approaches, smiling. Anastasios is still tired and cannot recall the name of the man, who is probably a friend. The man, however, seems to have recognised him at once, despite his emaciated frame and the scars left by the buboes.

"I'm Ernack," he says as he embraces him. "I followed your example and left the war. What's happened to you, my friend?"

"The plague," Anastasios replies simply.



CONTINUE

"I have just returned from Constantinople, and our Emperor Justinian has also recovered."

Anastasios smiles wearily, still lost in his thoughts and reflections. "... I, on the other hand, have returned... to life; I feared I might die, but I am still here," he says, addressing them both, "and I can tell you that difficult times are overcome together, without anyone being left alone... When the future is uncertain, courage lies in choosing to look after others..."

Life slowly returns to normal; the epidemic begins to subside until it almost disappears. Not everything goes back to the way it was before; many families are mourning their dead and the fields remain empty... but life moves forward more strongly, fuelled by the hope of new knowledge and new discoveries.



THE END

The harbour slowly fades away, the voices of the two young merchants grow fainter and the sea disappears. For a moment, silence returns, then, one by one, the students take off their headsets. They are all back in the classroom in front of their professor, who welcomes them with a smile.

“Welcome back,” she says, pausing for a moment, “... you have just travelled through one of the most difficult periods in history; you have seen how climate change, food shortages, wars, trade and disease can affect people’s lives, and how one can be the cause of the other. All these events have changed the lives of millions of people.”

The teacher walks slowly between the desks, looking the students in the eye.

“We are living in a different era, yet there are wars all around us, we have lived through a pandemic, and our behaviour is causing significant changes to the climate. The difference is this: that we know, that we have the knowledge... and the responsibility for what is happening.”



CONTINUE

She then addresses the class: "...this experience has shown you the active role of history; by studying it and learning from it, we can understand how the choices we make today can help us build the world of tomorrow."

"Anastasios and Theodosia have concluded their story and made their choices; now it's your turn..." She then corrects herself: "It's up to us – all of us – to write our own story, our own future, through the choices we make today." A murmur ripples through the class; the pupils look at one another.

"The future," continues Miss Ranucci, "depends on countless daily decisions, on how we use the resources at our disposal and the care we show for the environment; on the way we support others and respond to difficulties... Small gestures, repeated by many people, can bring about great changes.

I have one final question for you: what role do you want to play in building a better future for everyone?"



THE END

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1

2

3

4

5

Next



**How did the information available to
the characters influence their choices?
How can we tell whether a source of
information is reliable?**



How can we distinguish climate changes caused by natural factors from those caused by human activities?

What scientific evidence can we use?



Which situations or decisions in the story made you feel most uncomfortable? Why?



Which ending did you reach, and which choices led you to that outcome?



What connections can you identify between the crises faced by the characters and the challenges of today's world?

FURTHER RESOURCES

Next

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