

THE FALLING SWORD

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For everyone involved with Park in the Past*, in particular
Paul ‘Whirlwind’ Harston of Roman Tours UK, and all his team.

*Park in the Past is near Chester, north-west England; it’s a place where a second century ad Roman fort is being built. Interested? Check out the website: parkinthepast.org.uk – and please donate if you can at: localgiving.co.uk/park-in-the-past – thank you!

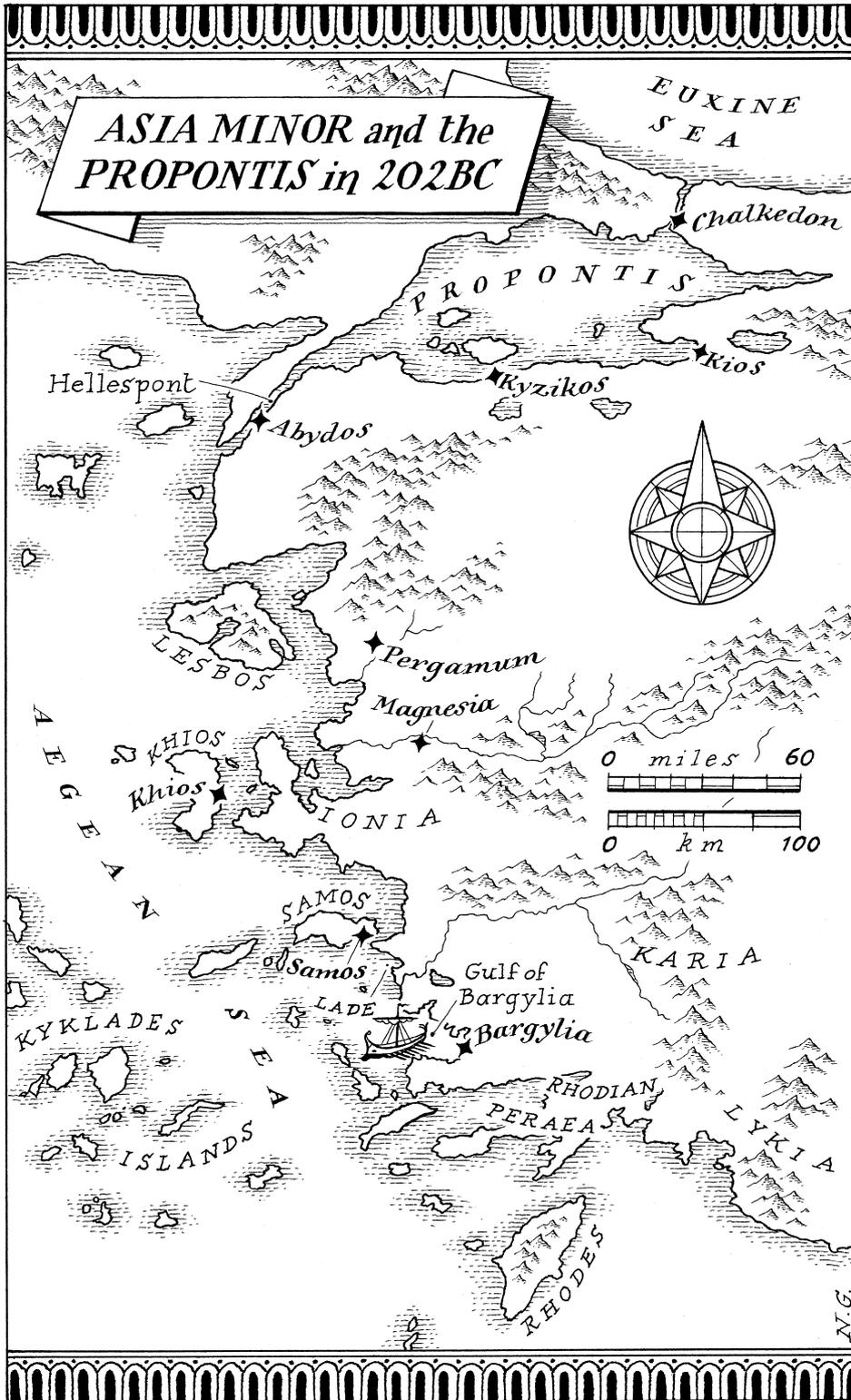
*Asked how he controlled the Greeks, Alexander the Great replied,
'By putting off nothing that ought to be done today until tomorrow.'*

A SHORT NOTE ABOUT GREEK CITY STATES

Ancient Greece contained a confusing plethora of similar-sounding city states and regions. Most readers will have known of Athens, Sparta and Macedon, but not necessarily of Aetolia, Achaea, Athamania and Acarnania. Thermopylae and Marathon will be familiar, but it's less likely for modern readers to know the towns of the Hellespont and the mountain towns between Macedon and Illyria. It took me some time to familiarise myself with these political and geographical entities, and so to increase your enjoyment of the book, I urge you first to spend a little time looking over the maps.

Ben Kane

**ASIA MINOR and the
PROPONTIS in 202BC**



CHAPTER I

Near Elatea in Phocis, autumn 198 BC

Despite the waning year, the narrow Phocian plain was bathed in warm sunlight. It was bordered to the north by mountains, on the other side of which lay Thermopylae, the ‘gates of fire’ where Leonidas and his Spartans had fought and died. South of these peaks the flat ground sprawled, bisected by a road that was as important now as it had been during the Persian invasions almost three centuries before. South of here lay Athens, open to attack. Harvest time was not long past; the fields were yet full of golden stubble. Neat rows of vines lined the road in places, their heavy clusters of blue-purple grapes an invitation to the thirsty traveller, or soldier.

Long trails of dust hung in the air, marking the passage of Titus Quinctius Flamininus’ army. Six days had gone by since its defeat at the Macedonian fortress of Atrax, eighty miles to the north-west. Its dead buried, the injured in wagons or left behind, it had come south-east to protect the Roman fleet, at harbour nearby. Other than the keen-eyed vultures following the legions from above, few creatures were abroad. The approach of such a host meant many things, none good. Local farmers had fled with their families and animals, a good number taking refuge inside Elatea, the town outside which the first of Flamininus’ troops were deploying.

The Roman vanguard had spread out, forming a protective screen for the rest of the army to deploy behind. Among the *principes* stood a friendly faced man by the name of Felix. Black-haired, sallow-skinned, he stood a head taller than most. He stared at the walls of Elatea with sullen resentment; so did his brother and his comrades. Elatea, with its defenders atop its walls, was a sharp reminder that the war wasn’t over. More of them would die here, thought Felix grimly. Not many, perhaps, but some.

Wise to the proximity of their acting commander Livius, no one

complained. Instead the principes leaned on their shields, drank sly mouthfuls of wine and waited, for orders, for time to pass.

Nothing would happen before the next day, Felix judged. After the cavalry and scouts, who travelled in front of the army, his unit had been among the first to arrive, which meant that at least three more hours would pass before the last of the miles-long column caught up. The wagons, laden down with supplies and the dismantled catapults, travelled slowly, and the score of war elephants did too. Stragglers would still be trailing in after the sun went down, and until they were told otherwise, Felix and his comrades had to watch out for a sally by Elatea's defenders.

An attack seemed doubtful: this was no mighty fortress built to protect Macedonia's borders, but a small town with a fortified rampart. The majority of its garrison would be bakers and carpenters, smiths, leather workers and wine sellers, not soldiers. They would certainly not be the phalangists of Atrax, on whose *sarissa* spears the legionaries had broken like waves on a harbour wall. Their centurion Pullo had been the most grievous loss, but plenty of ordinary soldiers in the century had fallen too, among them Felix's always-laughing friend Mattheus. Others had died during battles earlier that summer. Felix's original *contubernium* tent group was down to three men: him, his brother Antonius and Fabius, the crusty old veteran who snapped whenever anyone asked if he was related to Fabius 'the Delayer'.

'Won't be long now,' said a voice.

Felix started. Livius was an *optio*, but he had the unnerving centurion's knack of appearing when one least expected it. He had been in command since Pullo's death. Felix threw him a curious look. 'Until what, sir?'

Livius grinned, revealing the gap between his front teeth. 'Until you can start digging. The second half of the legion is almost here.'

Constructing the defensive ditch that would surround their camp, and after that, the rampart, was better than fighting, but Felix was unable to muster any enthusiasm. 'Aye, sir,' he mumbled.

'It's been a long march. I'll see that there's a ration of wine issued tonight.' Livius walked off, leaving Felix open-mouthed. The journey from the fortress where Pullo had fallen had been simple, and through easy terrain. The only difficulty had been the grief weighing them

down, and Livius had just acknowledged it, albeit indirectly.

‘He’s a good officer,’ said Felix under his breath.

‘More’s the pity that he won’t become our centurion,’ said Antonius. Shorter, more serious than Felix, he was four years the elder.

Rumour had it that those in command had been impressed with Livius’ holding together of the shattered century after Pullo’s death. Promotion to the centurionate wasn’t unheard of for similar feats of bravery, but it was something that none of the principes wanted for Livius, for it would mean losing him as well.

‘Gods will it that he’ll stay with us,’ said Fabius, giving his phallus amulet a rub. It was the norm for surviving junior officers to remain in place.

‘Who’s the new centurion going to be?’ said Felix.

A chorus of I don’t knows filled his ears, and he grimaced. There was no reason for his comrades to have any more idea than he. Don’t let it be a cunt like Matho, he prayed. Both brothers had served in the legions during the war with Hannibal; five years before, they had been dishonourably discharged by the malevolent Matho after the battle of Zama. Civilian life had not worked out for the pair, and when war was declared with Macedonia, they had risked their lives by joining the army again. Capricious to the last, the goddess Fortuna had again crossed their paths with Matho. The only witness to their final confrontation with him, which had resulted in Matho’s death, had been a Macedonian – a youth who was fortunately dead.

‘We need new men too,’ said Fabius. ‘Who ever heard of a contubernium of three?’

‘I don’t see that happening any time soon,’ observed Antonius.

‘More likely that we get shoved in with another tent group that’s in the same position.’ Felix raised his voice so it could be heard. ‘Let’s hope it’s not the shower of bastards in the next rank.’ He grinned at the shower of insults and threats that came by way of response.

The next few hours were spent in similar fashion. Wise to their need for diversion from the grim reality of life, Livius let them be. Other than the occasional wink of sunlight off a helmet, there was no activity atop Elatea’s walls. This was also heartening, as was Antonius’ observation that the defenders were shitting themselves at what would happen in the coming days.

*

Darkness blanketed the Phocian plain. Inside Elatea, dogs barked at one another, in the annoying way dogs do at night. Peace reigned over the great camps built by Flamininus' legions. Sentries paced the walkways, checked on every so often by junior officers. A short way beyond the ditch facing the town stood the catapults that would soon wreak havoc on Elatea's defences. The hour was late, and most men were abed. Among the neat lines of principes' tents a handful of fires still glowed, including that of Felix, Antonius and Fabius. Orders had come in at sunset. An attack on Elatea was planned for the next day; the principes would be taking part. This unwelcome news had seen the wine procured by Livius left unfinished. No one was stupid enough to get rat-arsed drunk with a fight in the offing. By unspoken consent, the assault went unmentioned.

'What will you do after the war?' Fabius inched his toes closer to the glowing embers, and then eyed Felix and Antonius, who were lounging on their blankets on the other side of the fire. 'You left your farm once before – could you go back to it?'

'I'll give it another try,' said Antonius, as he had each time the topic had been discussed during the previous two summers' campaigns. 'By the time this war is done, I should have enough coin to buy mules and a slave. That will make life a good deal easier.' He glanced at Felix, trying to gauge his interest, but Felix pretended not to see.

Fabius, who knew only that their farming life had been brutally hard, grunted. His gaze moved to Felix. 'And you?'

'What will you do, old man?' countered Felix.

'Me? Same as I've always said. I'm going to buy a tavern and slowly drink myself to death.'

Felix snorted. 'How long will that take?'

'Many years, I hope.' A rare smile appeared on Fabius' face. 'Why don't you two come in with me? You're young and strong – taverns need men like that around. With you around to keep me straight, I'll last into my sixties.'

'It could only be better than our last experience in the trade,' admitted Antonius. 'My ribs hurt just remembering it.'

Felix rubbed his jaw, which had ached for days after a fight with a brute who'd nearly had the better of the two of them. 'Where would it be?'

Fabius gave him a look. 'I'm from Rome. Where else would a man want to open a tavern?'

'There are plenty of shitty areas in Rome,' challenged Felix.

'D'you think I came down with the last shower?' retorted Fabius. 'I know that. We would decide on the location together.'

Felix glanced at Antonius, and then at Fabius. 'Equal partners?'

'As long as you can come up with a third of the coin each, aye.' Fabius spat on his hand and shoved it at Felix.

Felix held back. 'What d'you think, brother? Running a tavern has got to be better than working a plough day in, day out. Better than breaking your back at harvest time too.'

Antonius' eyes met his, and moved to Fabius, who nodded encouragingly, before returning to Felix. 'Aye, why not?' he muttered. 'If it doesn't work out, the farm will still be there.'

The three shook hands, grinning. Fabius produced a skin of wine, an event so rare that Felix declared it to be another reason for celebration. Under normal circumstances, this acid comment would have soured Fabius enough to make him refuse to share, but tonight he merely grumbled about youngsters having no respect for their elders and betters. The skin travelled around the fire, and the three partners took small sips as they discussed their new enterprise.

Fabius was the first to nod off. One moment he was enthusing about the wines he could buy from an old contact with a farm south of Rome, the next his chin was on his chest and he was gently snoring. There was no response from Antonius, and Felix saw with amusement that he too was almost asleep. Felix prepared to stir himself. It wasn't that cold, but the fire had burned down to embers. Despite the wine-warmth coating him, the tent was only a few paces away, and was worth getting up for. Tipping up the skin, he swallowed a few last drops. It had been a decent vintage, he decided.

He nudged Antonius and Fabius into wakefulness and went to empty his bladder in the latrine trench, which was close to the wall nearest Elatea. Job done, Felix smoothed down his tunic and turned to retrace his steps. He aimed an idle glance at the walkway, thinking he hadn't heard a sentry's tread while he'd been pissing. There was no one in sight, which was curious. He moved back a little, to see more of the earthen rampart, which stood tall as two men. Not a soul.

He felt a prick of alarm. Sliding his feet now so they made no sound,

he paced twenty and then fifty paces along the base of the wall. There were no sentries to be seen, but a telltale prone shape made his mouth go dry. Felix studied the nearest tents, but could see and hear nothing to suggest that attackers had entered the camp. He warred with himself for a moment. Scream a false alarm, and he would be punished. Better to check on the man, he decided, stealing towards the nearest ladder.

He crept up it, heart pounding, eyes darting to left and right along the walkway. Halfway up, he spied a second figure slumped in a sitting position. It had to be another sentry. Ill deeds *are* afoot, thought Felix, his pulse quickening. The Elateans weren't without spine after all. Crouching below the top of the rampart, he sped to the nearest sentry. The man lay face down and still as stone. A dark pool around his neck was grim warning of what had befallen him. Felix dipped his fingers into the liquid to be sure, and wished he hadn't. A grappling hook lay nearby, and from it a rope snaked over the rampart – this was how the enemy or enemies who'd slain the sentry had climbed up. He couldn't see a soul along the entire walkway, which meant this wall was undefended, but bizarrely there was still no sign of attackers within the camp.

He risked a look over the fortifications, and his eyes widened. Around the two large catapults that had pounded a hole in the walls of Atrax, dozens of figures loomed. Torches flickered in their hands; the distinctive tang of pitch carried through the air.

Felix leaped to his feet and bellowed the alarm with all his might.

Heads turned among the attackers, and their efforts to light the catapults grew more urgent.

Felix could hear sentries on the other walls taking up his call; there were men stirring in the nearest tents. It was slow, however, too slow. Flames were licking up the side of one catapult, and the attackers had moved on to the second weapon. He wondered about rousing Antonius and Fabius, but that would also take too long. Cursing himself for a fool, Felix stripped the dead sentry of his baldric and sword. He tossed the man's javelin and shield into the defensive ditch, checked the grappling iron was secure and clambered over the rampart. Down he went, hand over hand, balancing his feet against the wall. He paused at the bottom to stare at the attackers. None appeared to have noticed his descent. Not that they'd worry about one man, Felix decided grimly. He peered into the ditch, thinking, one slip and I'll end up on a caltrop, if

not two. There was nothing for it, though. Sitting on his arse with his hands on the edge, he eased himself down.

He gingerly found safe footing, and then crouched to spot the shield and javelin. Fortuna smiled on him; they had landed close by. Probing for caltrops with his fingertips, he retrieved both and heaved them over the lip of the ditch. Praying that no one was waiting to brain him, Felix scrambled out of the trench.

No one had noticed. Although there was good light now from the first burning catapult, the attackers were absorbed with trying to set the second piece ablaze. For some reason, it had not ignited with the ease of its companion, but given their frantic efforts, it wouldn't be long going the same way. Felix wavered. He had raised the alarm; he could not put out the fire alone, and the attackers would soon be driven off. Why throw his life away?

One of the attackers turned and saw him.

Felix had time to think what an old bitch Fortuna was, and then he was beckoning to imaginary comrades and shouting, 'Come on, brothers! With me!' He threw the javelin, spitting one of the enemy between the shoulder blades. Then, roaring as if he were a century of legionaries, not one, he drew the sword and ran towards the burning catapults.

The man who'd seen him was nervous. His badly aimed spear hummed past, nowhere near Felix.

Felix was on him in another heartbeat. The shield boss slammed the man backwards, onto his arse. Felix left him behind, closing on a second man who, panicked by his wild face, turned to flee. Felix stabbed him in the back, and drove on. Two attackers joined forces, one going left of Felix, the other right. I'm dead, he thought. They'll have seen I'm alone. He made a snap judgement; the one to his left was no more than a youth. Dart forward. Punch with the shield. Stab with his sword, and the youth went down, mewling like a babe ripped from the tit.

Felix spun, wary of the second attacker. The man was hanging back, however. Paunchy, holding his shield and spear like a new recruit, he was no soldier. Felix felt a glimmer of hope. He charged, not seeing the discarded torch underfoot. Skidding, balance lost, he stumbled forward and fell flat on his face. A cry of triumph rose from his opponent, who stepped in, spear raised high.

‘ROMA!’ The cry was some distance off, but it was being made by scores of voices. ‘ROMA!’

Felix flinched, still expecting a spear in the back.

The blow didn’t fall. Feet pounded. Men cried to one another in Greek.

Felix rolled over, unable to believe his luck. A trained soldier would have killed him before running away, but the paunchy man had given in to fear, and saved his own skin.

An odd peace fell. Wood crackled. Heat radiated from the catapults. Felix got to his feet. Both artillery pieces were ablaze now; attempt to put out the fire and he would get badly burnt. He stood back, deciding that Fortuna had been tempted enough for one night.

The siege of Elatea was going to be more difficult than everyone had assumed.