

THE COLUMN OF PHOCAS, BY SEAN GABB

Title: *The Column of Phocas*

Genre: Historical Thriller

Word Count: 108,025

By Sean Gabb

Synopsis

This novel blends historical detail with violence, mystery, dark humour, and reflections on the decay of learning. There is a certain amount of sex, both straight and gay, but this is never graphically described.

It is intended to be the first novel of a series. Throughout, as in the *Flashman* novels, there is reference to later events. Unlike in the *Flashman* novels, the narrator is not a coward. But he is just as cynical and sceptical about religion. He is also not always very competent, and relies on others to save him from the scrapes into which he blunders. The novel also owes something to the historical detective novels of Stephen Saylor and Lindsey Davis, but is set about 650 years later.

Rome in 609 AD. The Empire has fallen. The City itself is rapidly falling into ruins. The streets are blocked with filth and rubble. Killers prowl by night. The Church is the only institution left intact, and is flexing its own imperial muscles.

Into this comes Maximin, a priest sent back by the new mission to England, and his young assistant, Aelric, an Englishman born in Kent and the narrator of the novel. They come to gather more books for the mission library and to report on the work of conversion. On their way in, they blunder into a mysterious plot involving the transfer of some letters, a relic and a large amount of gold to persons unknown. They trick these out of those engaged to transfer them. They are so pleased about the gold and the relic that they forget all about the letters. This encounter is of great importance, as everything else in the novel flows logically from it.

They are followed into and through Rome by persons unknown. There is a

THE COLUMN OF PHOCAS, BY SEAN GABB

chain of gruesome murders and attempts on the life of Aelric, who has to turn investigator to discover the truth about the letters.

The truth, when it emerges, requires Aelric to choose between duty and ambition. Whatever choice he makes will shape the future of Europe and the world.

The Column of Phocas By Sean Gabb

Chapter One

I, Aelric of Richborough, also known as Alaric of Britain and by sundry other names throughout the Greek Empire and in the realms of the Saracens, in this six hundred and eighty fourth year of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in the second year of Pope Leo II, and in the twenty fifth year of Emperor Constantine IV (assuming his sons or the Saracens or his own eunuchs have not yet finished him off), and in my own ninety fifth year, sit here in the monastery at Jarrow to write the history of my life.

And that's as far as I got yesterday. It isn't that writing comes hard to me. I must have written half a library in my time – histories, intelligence reports, libels, begging letters, flattery, smutty poems, and so forth. I don't think it's that I'm going senile. Down in Canterbury, Archbishop Theodore is only eighty eight, and is getting decidedly past it. Of course, I do owe him a lot – not least that he overlooked all he knew about my past when he let me settle here after just about everywhere else in the world had grown too hot for me. But I was with him at Christmas, and he was babbling the most awful nonsense in Latin and Greek – and he wasn't even talking theology. I, on the other hand, remain sound in body and mind.

Oh, the years have taken their price. My looks are long gone. I saw my reflection a few days back, and I reminded myself of nothing so much as one of the unwrapped mummies they sell in Alexandria – brown teeth sticking through shrivelled lips, a few wisps of hair hanging at random from my scalp: it isn't a pretty face nowadays. And I could wish my sexual functions were a

THE COLUMN OF PHOCAS, BY SEAN GABB

little more active than they have become in recent years: my favourite student, Bede, after all, is rather pretty, and his sister would once have had me scheming to get the clothes off her. Otherwise, I feel much the same as ever.

No, it was the weather. Kent has its bad days. Up here in Northumbria, it rains for months on end. I can hardly remember when I last spent a whole day reading in the sun. I began writing yesterday afternoon. Then a storm blew up; and by the time Abbot Benedict had sent Wilfred over with some lamps, I'd gone off the idea of writing. Instead, I drank myself silly and went to bed. If I woke this morning with a splitting head, it only gave me an excuse to avoid prayers.

Or was it the weather?

“Why don't you write your life?” Benedict asked me the other day after he'd watched me on my best behaviour in the Latin class – that is, not ogling every boy without spots. “God has blessed you with so many years, and these have been crowded with so many worthy deeds. A full record would be so very *edifying*.”

Edifying, indeed! Is the man utterly ignorant of all I've got up to in the past eighty odd years? Since he lacks any noticeable taste for irony, I suppose he is. Yes, I owe a lot to poor old Theodore of Tarsus. In my time, I have committed almost every sin that can be imagined – rape, sodomy, piracy, murder, theft, blackmail, deception, and blasphemy. I never had occasion to commit incest. To make up for this, though, I once did pose for six months as the Bishop of Laodicea, in which role I ordained several dozen priests, some of whom went on to become bishops, while at the same time spying on the King of Persia and sleeping with one of his wives. Such a record might be interesting, but could never be described as edifying.

I suppose I could cut out all the naughty bits, but that would leave an embarrassingly thin record of ninety four years. So I've decided to leave the above in Latin, but to switch to Greek for the rest.

I do run a Greek class up here – if it gave me an excuse for being alone with young Bede, I'd lay on a class in Arabic! But I doubt if the ability I'm

THE COLUMN OF PHOCAS, BY SEAN GABB

teaching to read The Gospels and a few of those ghastly saints' lives will let anyone inclined to snoop through my papers get far with the Greek of the Empire that I can write.

For my own entertainment, therefore, I will write the history of my life, leaving nothing unsaid – so long, that is, as it doesn't slip my memory. And if anyone after my death does manage to read this, and doesn't approve, I can say only, to quote one of the old Alexandrian poets, “fuck them”!

I was born in Erith in the Kingdom of Kent in the year 590. Ethelbert then was the King. Because that bitchy wife of his got him to welcome the missionaries, he's now a saint. The Ethelbert I remember was a fat, pop-eyed monster with rotten teeth and a partiality to other men's wives. That's why he had my father put to death and took his lands away. The story given out was that my father was plotting with the King of Wessex. He probably was. At least, I would have been. But that was only an excuse. He fancied my mother, and there was a row over it. So my father was hacked to death after some travesty of customary justice, and my mother with me and two other children were dumped a few months after that in a derelict arms store in Richborough. He used to send us the occasional scraps of food and clothing. Every now and again, he'd ride over with some of his men and give my mother a seeing to. He fathered a daughter on her – an oddly pretty girl in the circumstances: she didn't look at all like him. While he was over, he used to wrap himself in a bit of purple curtain he'd bought off some Syrian traders and parade round the semi-habitable parts of town getting the locals to hail him as Caesar Augustus.

In those days, you see, Richborough was one of the few places in the kingdom our ancestors hadn't completely smashed up when they took over from the Romans. Oh, it was a dump compared with some of the places I've seen since – no bath house, drains all blocked, so shit in the streets, pigs and chickens running about, most of the roofs fallen in. But it had been in the old days the main port of a very rich province, and for all it was fallen on evil times, it was still a walled town, with houses and a few merchants who kept up some trade with the rest of the world. And it was a fair distance from where Queen Berthe used to hold court. I shouldn't be surprised Ethelbert liked the place.

Because Richborough was only on the edge of nowhere, as opposed to being

THE COLUMN OF PHOCAS, BY SEAN GABB

in the middle of it, my mother was able to get me some education. When I was seven, I went to a school run by Auxilius, a broken down monk on the run from his order in France. He'd killed a man, and even under King Chilperic, that was considered not quite proper for a man in his position. Safe in Richborough, he'd taken a wife and some students.

He used to teach in a little church that still had most of its roof. "I am a man of God" he would say. "Therefore, God's house is mine". To be fair, no one else wanted the place. The few Christians left in town were even more lapsed than he was. He taught us. In return, we dug his garden and took him drink and whatever food we could lift from the local villages. What I remember most about him is his pockmarked face and his habit of blowing his nose on the ragged hem of his monastic robe – I don't think he had any other clothes. But he was a good teacher, and I think I'm qualified to judge in these matters. He kept order without too much use of the stick, mostly kept his hands of us, and got us started on Latin.

You know, I'm not doing the man justice. He was a very good teacher. He started me on scratching the letters and syllable combinations on bits of broken roof tile. Then he taught me the use of a stylus he'd dug out of the ruined basilica. Bronze, a point at one end, a flat blade at the other, this had been used in the old days for writing on wax tablets. Auxilius believed in the old ways, and had us smearing mutton fat on small pieces of board. He would dictate. When I'd got it right, I had to wipe the fat smooth and start on the next task.

He didn't teach the debased conversational Latin of our own age. "*petere fontes*" he used to say as he let us read from the few books of ancient writings he'd stolen before going on the run – "Go to the sources". Of course, he never let us touch the books – as if his own hands were any cleaner than ours – but he let us stand close enough to read from them and carefully put their contents into our little memories. On hot days, he'd take us round what was left of the town, getting us to read the inscriptions. Or we'd go out to one of the graveyards. In those days, the stones were still in place, not yet taken off to build into walls. From him I learnt the Latin of Rome and some of the feeling for what Rome had been. In the years I drifted in and out of his class – I was never a regular student – I learnt everything he had to teach. If I now

THE COLUMN OF PHOCAS, BY SEAN GABB

preside over the greatest centre of learning this side of the Balkans, it is due to the start Auxilius gave me in that crumbling church, with a pig sty at one end and a tree pushing up the mosaic pavement in the middle.

When I was nine, he took us all down the coast to Deal, a little fishing village, where, he assured me, Julius Caesar had landed over six hundred years before. Holding a stick in one hand and a jug of beer in the other, he made me recite the passage from *De Bello Gallico* in which Casear describes how shallow water had prevented the Romans from beaching their ships and the ferocious Britons and had driven the invaders from the shore, and how a standard bearer of the Tenth Legion sprang into the sea, defying his comrades to allow the Roman eagle to fall into enemy hands thus spurring them onto victory.

As I finished the passage word perfect, Auxilius grunted his approval. "We Romans will be back" he assured me – he claimed a senatorial aristocrat among his Gallic ancestors. "Then the world will be set to rights."

He took a swig from his jug and fell I imagine into a reverie of restored Imperial grandeur. I was too awed to remind him that a *restoratio orbis Romanae* might not be in his own best interest. As we wandered back along the broken road to Richborough, he recited Claudian and Vergil while we students danced round him in the gathering gloom catching at the night flies. It was one of those perfect summer evenings in Kent, when the sun has gone down and the sky is turning purple above the forest. I don't know what became of him, but I am in his debt, and so by extension is the English Church.

What might have become of me I also don't know. I was landless and without any kin that was willing to recognise me as such. When I was seventeen, my mother died from eating some bad oysters Ethelbert had sent us. That was in the spring. I came back late from some business I had been transacting inland, to find Auxilius in the house giving her the last rites while his woman was cleaning vomit off the floor. It had been fast, he told me. Between her falling down outside the privy and dying had been barely time to get her baptised.

"Baptised?" I asked.

“Yes” Auxilius replied firmly but looking away from me. “She died in the Faith”.

Was she poisoned? I’d put nothing past Ethelbert. But it was more likely he’d simply killed her with the unusually shitty food he had taken to sending us. The winter had been cold and long, and screwing anything out of the churls was hard that year. My two younger brothers had died a few months earlier from one of the fevers that are endemic in Kent. My half sister sat in a corner clutching a broken doll and weeping quietly. My mother lay still quieter on the rush bed.

Spring was far advanced. The birds were singing outside. The trees were in full bud. But a shaft of sunlight played on my mother’s dead features. I could remember when she had been so beautiful and strong. It was only a few years before. A young fisherman had used to come and sing to her from outside the house while she tried to look scandalised. But then she had grown so suddenly old and pinched. Now she was dead. It hadn’t been much of a life, I grant. But 32 was far too young to be taken out of it. I’ve lived nearly three times that, and could happily live that long more. I felt her death badly then. I feel it badly still.

As soon as he heard the news, Ethelbert relieved me of any family duties I might have inherited. He took my half sister away – he was thinking to marry her to one of his grade two retainers. Then he had me thrown into the street. His men turned up a day after Auxilius had conducted the funeral. They took a silver brooch that had been my mother’s only remnant of our old standing, and chased me out of the house. What Ethelbert wanted with the place I never did learn, but it was one of the few buildings in town with a sound roof. As I picked up my only change of clothes they’d tossed into the mud, his men advised me to go sell my arse in Canterbury if I didn’t want to starve.

Chapter Two

Good advice in part. I did go to Canterbury. By now, the missionaries were here in force and were rebuilding the old city as a religious centre. I was in the great church when there I last visited Theodore. It’s not much compared with the really big churches in Rome and Constantinople, but it’s grand in its own terms. If it wasn’t even an architect’s plan when I first turned up there, I could see the priests were thinking big. There were churches and administrative buildings going up all over the place. Much of the material was cannibalised from ruins – there was a regular train of carts trundling up and down from London, then still abandoned. But it was all cleaned and made to look fresh. It must have been the first proper stone and brick work since my people arrived.

The streets between the churches were narrow, and crowded with the usual wood and thatch houses. But the city had a rush and general feeling of life I hadn’t been able to imagine in sad, crumbling old Richborough. There, I’d noted the sudden increase in shipping after I was about ten, and had seen the missionaries and their retainers coming back and forth in small groups. Now I saw them all together – hundreds of them in the streets, all dressed in what to me seemed fine clothes and talking Latin and other languages I’d never before heard.

I didn’t have to sell my arse there. Auxilius had written me a letter of introduction to someone he described as “an old friend”. How he could still have any standing with the Church was a mystery to me. But the answer was simple. England was on the frontier between Christianity and paganism. The Romans weren’t back in the way Auxilius had said, but their Church was back, and it needed every hand to join in the work of spiritual reconquest. Men like Auxilius were simply too useful for a few old and distant crimes to stand in the way. And the place is still a frontier. Look at me. I’ve done worse than Auxilius could have dreamed, and here I sit, and even those who can don’t care to raise a word against me.

I was taken on by Maximin, a fat priest from Ravenna whose smooth face gave him the appearance of a man somewhat younger than middle age. He had been given the job of setting up a school for the local boys. The job he gave me was to teach him English, and in the meantime to act as his interpreter

THE COLUMN OF PHOCAS, BY SEAN GABB

with the natives. Teaching a language that has nothing in writing must always be hard, I imagine. What made it harder was that English had – and has - no settled usage. Another few years, and I was an expert on languages, collecting points of difference like some people collect relics. At the time, I'd spend days with Maximin going about the local villages trying to keep up with the fact that words like “egg” and “boot” were different every few miles. He explained to me that all languages were related in that they all descended from Hebrew, the language of the Jews. Well, he had a point with the first part of that. It wasn't hard to see the resemblance between Latin and English, and later on between them and Greek, and then with the Slavonic tongues, and even with Persian. But I've seen no points of similarity between them and Hebrew, though this is surprisingly close to Arabic and Coptic.

But I'm writing about me, not a treatise on etymology, so I won't develop my argument. Even so, I believe that if there was a God who endowed us with language, he did it several times, sometimes with a slightly and sometimes with a very different plan in mind.

It was now that I got myself baptised. This was on my eighteenth birthday, which got us all a double celebration. Though he never taught me anything positive about religion, Auxilius had sneered me out of any belief in the old tribal gods. I sometimes think he had more feeling for the old Roman gods. In Canterbury, I sneered myself out of accepting the Faith. Going about with Maximin, I saw too many fake miracles from the inside too soon. Had I been converted first, and then seen the same man raised from the dead four times in different places, or all the careful preparations needed before a staff could be made to catch fire when struck against a rock, I might, like the missionaries, have regarded these as necessary frauds for getting a barbarous race to accept a truth not otherwise communicable. But I went into Maximin's service an unbeliever and have remained one ever since. Then as now, however, I outwardly conformed. What little interest I developed in theology served only to let me know to what I should conform in any given time or place.

But I was a convert, and this got me in with all the missionaries. “*Non Anglus*” they used to coo at me, “*sed angelus*” – “not English but an angel”. No doubt, it wasn't just my conformity that got them excited. I had long golden curls in those days, and hadn't yet started on a beard. It was plain I had turned the

THE COLUMN OF PHOCAS, BY SEAN GABB

heads of more than a few priests, even if most of them did have to stand on their toes to touch my curls. They never did anything, but they certainly looked.

And by early summer, I was valued for more than my pretty boy looks. It wasn't just Maximin who was ignorant of English, and the few English converts who'd come with the missionaries had poor Latin. I was fought over as an interpreter. I was set to work in the mission library to produce an improved dictionary of Latin and English. I did think of an English Grammar, but the difficulty of squeezing English usage into Latin categories was beyond me at the time.

I can't say the majority of the books in that library were to my taste. They were mostly lives of saints written in a style that would have disgraced an idiot child. Or they were long diatribes against the Arian and Monophysite heresies. In those days, this former was still quite big in the West, particularly among the barbarians, who felt more at home with a Son decidedly subordinate to the Father than with the frankly incomprehensible orthodoxy of three gods in one. Maximin was always on the look for any sign of spontaneous heresy, and I had to interrogate his converts endlessly, making up answers to questions that they couldn't begin to understand. All this, yet I know at least half the missionaries had Arian inclinations themselves.

I read all this stuff for the vocabulary. What I really loved, though, was the small collection of ancient writings that had been sent over from Rome. Opening a volume of Cicero was like stepping from deep shadow into the sunlight. I couldn't see then what a ranting fraud he often was. It was his largeness of mind, his wondrous flexibility of language and the flashes of knowledge he gave out of a still more distant age of beauty and reason among the Greeks.

If you gather from this I was becoming a scholar, you'd be right. The spark Auxilius had kindled in my soul became a bright and steady flame in that mission library in Canterbury. That has been the only consistent theme in my life. If any atonement is required for all else I have done and not done, let this be my obsession with the languages and learning of the ancients. I have much reason to thank those fussy old queens who gave up safety and comfort to

THE COLUMN OF PHOCAS, BY SEAN GABB

come over with Augustine. Not least of my debts is the hours of uninterrupted time they allowed me – a barbarian youth of untested honesty – among the precious volumes they'd hauled all the way from Rome. I sucked knowledge from these as a camel sucks from a water hole in the desert. And I always wanted more.

Yet where, you might ask, was all this going? The answer should be easy. I'd been taken on by the missionaries. It should have seemed my obvious destiny to join them. I had no place among my own people. I'd never felt much of a common bond with them. Now, as I looked at the closed, stupid faces of the churls in the field, or the no less stupid but drunken faces of the freemen in the street, I could see the gulf that had opened between us. At the same time, I wasn't really one with the missionaries. Some of them fancied me. More of them needed my abilities. But I could tell by the way they sometimes dropped their voices, or switched into a barbarous Latin I couldn't follow, when I was around that I was an outsider here as well.

Yes, I had only to say the word to be put on an accelerated path to ordination: as said, this was a frontier where rules could be bent as convenient. But I really couldn't see myself as one of them, going about Kent for the rest of my life, muttering words I didn't believe and that no one listening could understand over births, deaths and marriages, and faking miracles to keep the churches and my own belly full.

You may ask what I was doing with so tender a conscience. A bit of hypocrisy has never troubled me since. I was young and I was confused. Mornings I spent with Maximin or, increasingly, one of his superiors. Afternoons I spent in the library, writing out endless word lists and reading the great ones of antiquity. At night abed, the confusion and loneliness gathered round me like a winter fog. I thought of my mother and the brothers I had lost, and all I had known in Richborough. And I wondered about the future. If not as a priest, how could I go through life?

It was Edwina who really took my mind off the long term. She was the daughter of Alfred, one of Ethelbert's big men. He'd taken up residence in Canterbury to keep an eye on things – making sure the missionaries were suitably grateful for the hospitality they were given. It was one of my

THE COLUMN OF PHOCAS, BY SEAN GABB

jobs to interpret whenever he had some of them over for dinner. I'd stand behind Maximin or one of the others, switching every few moments between Latin and English, struggling to put the gross flattery of one language into something equivalent in the other.

In the feasting hall, she usually sat a few places down from her father. The dark, brown hair, those fine, regular features, the shape and bearing as she sometimes went about the hall – I don't think it possible to describe her. But her effect on me was overpowering. I was smitten, and this was my first love. I used to think myself happier than a god whenever I could stand not ten foot from her and watch her laughing sweetly with all the early promise of her fifteen years. Afterwards, when alone, I'd wank myself sore.

It might have gone on as innocently as this until the passion burnt itself out. But one day in August, I met her in the street. I was on some errand for one of the big missionaries, and it took me by Alfred's house on the outskirts of the city. With sweaty hands and a lump in my throat, I nodded to her. I expected her to hurry past without a greeting, but she stopped.

“What are the missionaries like in private?” she asked.

I began to gabble out a description of prayers and reading and not too much drink. But I soon realised she was really interested in me, and the question about them was an excuse. Indeed, she quickly made it plain that she fancied me only a little less than I her. Though young, I was big and well-made, and I knew I had a lovely smile when I turned it on. Given effort, I could even make it look spontaneous.

So our illicit relationship began. We'd meet long after dark behind her father's stable and entertain ourselves till Dawn with her grey fingers fringed the Kentish sky. Like one of those ancient novelists, I could fill up pages with accounts of what we did, and how often. But I won't. Either you've had a lot of sex when young and in love or you haven't. If you haven't, no mere words will convey the ecstatic union of bodies and souls. If you have, there is no need of words.

So we continued until the weather turned against us and we had to

consider what new arrangements might be possible. It was then, unfortunately, that her belly began to swell. I was young enough and stupid enough to be as much pleased as alarmed. Edwina was simply alarmed. I suggested we should run away to France. If people could run from there to here, I urged, why not the other way around? She asked the usual womanly questions about what to do there and how to eat. I gave the answers usual of youth. They failed to convince.

So far as I can tell, she went to one of the household women to ask about herbs. She in turn went directly or through another to Alfred. The first I knew of this was when I was grabbed one afternoon as I walked out of the library to rest my eyes. I felt a crushing blow on my head, and came to in a cart trussed like a bundle of wood. I was dumped late the next evening outside Ethelbert's hunting lodge near Rochester. I was soaked through by the rain that had fallen all day and so frozen I could hardly stand when cut loose without the support of the two strong men who held each arm tight.

Chapter Three

The gleemen were singing an old battle song as I was pushed into the high single room of the lodge. It was built in the traditional style – a reed covering on the trampled earth of the floor, a central hole in the thatch covering that let rain in from the drizzle above while not doing much with the smoke from the great fire below. The damp wood smoke competed with the smell of farting. I quickly gathered the company had been feasting for hours. Sat pulling meat off a whole roast sheep were Ethelbert and about thirty of his cronies and retainers. Snarling and yapping, their dogs ran among them.

“Well, just look what the fucking cat's brought in!” roared Ethelbert pulling himself unsteadily to his feet. The music stopped. He staggered towards me, taking a gulp from his drinking horn. He'd put on even more weight than when I'd last seen him in the early spring. Flickering light and dark in the wall torches and the cooking fire, his face shone with sweat and mutton grease. There was that exultant tone to his voice that I remembered well from when he was minded to let everyone around him know who was the absolute boss.

“You've been a bad boy” he said, his voice dropping to what a stranger might have taken for good humour. “You've been making that two backed beast with someone you shouldn't never have looked at. You've dishonoured my best man's daughter. You've dishonoured him. You've dishonoured me. Come on, my lad, speak up.”

“I can explain” I croaked. How I could explain I had no idea. I was hardly able to keep the tears back. I knew what he could do, and was beginning to shake with terror as well as the cold. “I – I...”

And that was all the speaking Ethelbert wanted. He dropped the façade of good humour and reverted to his more usual tyrannical mode. “You fucking piece of shit!” he screamed at me, his large face purple with rage, veins in his forehead swollen. “I gave you your life. I gave you food from my table. I gave you everything. And this is how you repay me.” He jerked his head over to the company. Alfred sat there among the others. He was somewhat less demure in his bearing than I'd seen him among the missionaries. And if he didn't seem inclined to embrace me as a son in law, he didn't seem that put out

THE COLUMN OF PHOCAS, BY SEAN GABB

either by his daughter's dishonour. He raised his horn and grinned at me.

Ethelbert continued: "You snake. You fucker. You fucking piece of shit. Do you know what we're going to do to you?" he put his face close to mine. I could smell the sour breath – all rotting teeth and vomity beer and food. His jowls shook. "See that ladder over there? I'm having you splayed on that like a rabbit ripe for gutting. I'll have you begging for death before I'm done with you, you fucking piece of fucking shit." He stopped. He opened his mouth wide. A belch came out, followed by a stream of mutton juice. It ran down his chin onto his front.

I spoke quickly. "Sir, I claim my right as a freeman to face my accuser, sword in hand. I claim my right under ancient custom." I looked across at Alfred. He was really grinning now, his sword pulled half way out. I couldn't last long against him even in a fair contest. He must have been twice my weight and size. But anything was better than Ethelbert had in mind for me. I might have added an appeal to the whole company: if Ethelbert could do this to a noble's son, what might he one day do to their sons?

No time. Ethelbert recovered himself. "Don't give me none of that poof talk" he screamed, all control gone. He landed a great punch in my stomach. He took me by surprise. If I hadn't been held fast on both sides, I'd have gone down like a fallen roof tile. I slumped into the grasp of his men, gagging and coughing. He aimed a kick at my balls, but missed, his nailed boot opening a gash in my thigh. I tried to scream, but only a croak issued. I was numb with terror. This couldn't be happening. It was surely a nightmare. In a minute, I'd wake in the mission library and go back to thinking how to lay my hands on some cash to get myself and Edwina across the Channel. But I was a wake and this was really happening. I was in the absolute power of a filthy barbarian tyrant. He'd killed my father. Now he'd kill me. I could have shat myself, but had nothing in my guts but wind.

"Don't give me none of your fucking so-called rights" he continued. "You lost your free status when your father tried to fuck me over. You're fucking mine." He stepped right up to me. He embraced me and suddenly kissed me. He forced his slimy tongue deep into my mouth and flickered it against my throat. I could feel his swollen cock throbbing against me through his

THE COLUMN OF PHOCAS, BY SEAN GABB

breeches. I tried to pull away, but was held fast in a grip tighter than iron.

He stepped back, now under control. He gave me another of his exultant grins. "Hey, Alfred" he called over in a light voice. "Do you want this little shitbag afterwards to comb your daughter's hair? He'll be safe enough then with her. Or do you want him in your fields with the other churls? Do you want him with or without eyes?"

"No, please" I whispered. But I was lifted bodily and carried towards the ladder over by the far wall. There were a few laughs and appreciative murmurs as my legs were forced apart and I was tied in place with leather bands.

"Come on, look lively" Ethelbert shouted, wheeling round to take in the whole display of his power. "Get that poncy tunic of his up. Let's have a butchers at what he's still got under there. Two sheep, Alfred, it's no bigger than a baby's finger. Not that it makes any difference now, but do you really believe it was this snivelling little piece of shit who got your girl up the duff?" He turned back to me and grasped at my clothing, leering maniacally up at me. I swallowed and began to pray under my breath to the god of the missionaries.

"Halt!" In a deep accented English, the word cut through the air like a knife. The room fell silent. Even the dogs ceased their yapping.

"Halt in the name of God and the Church!" Maximin stood by the door, his sodden robe sticking to his little round body. How did he get here? I thought. He must have walked all night and all day and evening from Canterbury. He advanced into the room. "The boy belongs to Holy Mother Church. None may touch him."

A couple of Ethelbert's men sprang at him, swords drawn. He gave them a brief, contemptuous look, then turned back to Ethelbert.

"Let one hair of this boy's head be harmed" he said in the strong, dramatic voice he used for preaching, and you will answer to Holy Mother Church in this life and to God our Father in the life that is to come. I tell you this as the representative in this room of the Universal Bishop in Rome who sits

in the place of Our Lord's Apostle Peter."

There was a laugh at the back of the room. We weren't ten years into the first mission to England, and these savages didn't care either way for the Faith. A word from Ethelbert, and they'd cut him down before he could draw breath again. But Ethelbert had dropped on his knees, his face grey with fear. It may have been thoughts of hellfire. More likely, it was thoughts of Queen Berthe. She was hard at work, building more new churches than her husband had fathered bastards. The last thing he wanted was the whole kingdom excommunicated. No one – certainly never in public before his senior men – had spoken like this to him before. Yes, he'd been defied, but no one had ever denied his authority to do as he liked when he liked. And yet he was grovelling among the filthy rushes on his own floor before a little, soft-handed foreigner.

You can forget all those fake miracles the Church lays on for gaping simpletons. This was the real thing, and I've seen more like it since then. These priests have a courage born of belief that none of the heroes in our old epics come close to matching. You can kill them. You can burn their shrines and wipe your arse with their books. You will never touch the fundamentals of their *imperium* over the soul. Rome's first conquest of England was by the sword, and by the sword it was lost. Its second conquest was by men like Maximin, and this will never be lost.

"Reverend Father" Ethelbert cried. "This boy is a criminal. He has sinned against God, and he has broken our law too. He must be punished according to our law."

"He has sinned against God, that much is sure" Maximin continued with a grim look in my direction. "But he stands within the Church, and he shall be judged within the Church. Give him up to me now, King Ethelbert. I speak with full authority."

"What judgment shall the Church make against him?" Ethelbert whispered.

"None less than His Holiness in Rome shall decide the penance." Maximin replied. I thought he had gone too far now, but Ethelbert remained kneeling. "We leave for Rome before Advent. Depending on the penance, the boy

may never return." He pointed at my guards. "Untie him and give him to me." Ethelbert nodded to them. I felt a knife brush cold against my wrists, and the blood came back into my hands. I stumbled forward. Someone held me from falling.

Maximin beckoned me to follow him and walked towards the door. As I walked past him, Ethelbert, still kneeling, said in a voice so low I wasn't certain I heard him: "If I catch you in my realms after this man has left for Rome, I'll have your balls on a church plate, and fuck the priests."

The man was a stinking bastard. Some years later, I rejoiced when I heard about his death. It was from some disgusting pox he'd caught off one of his whores. The priests put out their usual rot about the deaths of those who have advanced the Faith – angelic choirs above, flowery smells, and all that - but my source told me he died screaming while maggots dropped out of his burst scrotum.

When we were about fifty yards down the cart track, the music started up again. I turned to Maximin in the darkness. I didn't think it appropriate to thank him. No words could do justice to that performance.

"What will we do next?" I asked.

"As I said" he replied blandly, "we are going to Rome. You have penance to seek there. And I have been sent to gather more books for the mission library. After that, I have no idea. But I have no doubt you will find our trip of interest."

And if you want more of this, you will need to wait for publication. If you are a publisher, or know one, please contact me - sean@libertarian.co.uk