

Immortal Africanus: Belisarius And The Roman Empire's Return to Rome

Matthew Jordan Storm

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A well-written piece of historical fiction, this book's themes of courage and frailty, love and murder, order and chaos will resonate.

Military history buffs and aficionados of ancient Rome will find battles and skirmishes, murder and intrigue galore in Matthew Jordan Storm's *Immortal Africanus: Belisarius and the Roman Empire's Return to Rome*, the third book in the Legend of Africanus series. This exhaustively researched volume chronicles the life and military exploits of Flavius Belisarius, variously known as Magister Militum, Autokrator, and the last great Roman general, in the decade during which he rose to power and, beyond all odds, recaptured Rome for Emperor Justinian early in the sixth century.

"This is not a book of history," cautions the author. It is a work of fiction, complete with invented dialogue and scenes that may not have transpired at all. Yet, *Immortal Africanus* succeeds as a work of historical fiction because the characters described and the scenes presented ring true. Thus, the author achieves his goal of "balancing the historian's need to be precise with a storyteller's desire to engage."

Storm's focus is not solely upon Belisarius; he also comments on war and its impact:

The Historian [Procopius] and the Centurion [Valentinian] sat in silence, admiring the ghastly scenes of war carved on the marble arch, vast conquering armies, murders, beheadings, the forced march of prisoners—all of it comprised Titus' noble victory, the mutilation and subjugation of a great people.

The main narrative arc describing Belisarius's feats is intertwined with subplots involving other Romans, as well as Goths, Vandals, and followers of the pope. Indeed, the cast of characters is large enough to populate a Russian novel. Fortunately, the author provides a table of notes on the thirty persons most important to the plot, as well as tables on noteworthy places and dates.

Following the story of Belisarius and his cohorts, however, requires more than simply keeping the legions of characters straight. The plot requires acquaintance with lineages of Romans, Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Franks, Burgundians, and Vandals, whose bloodlines sometimes intermingled. In addition, point of view changes, shifting from one subplot to another, providing challenging reading—particularly for those who are not knowledgeable about ancient history and have not read the first two volumes in the Legend of Africanus trilogy.

Shifting loyalties and unstable alliances add to the story's complexity. In addition, chapters focus on different characters, often beginning with dialogue for which participants are not immediately identified. As a result, it's challenging to ascertain who is speaking, where the scene is set, and why it is important. Identifying those elements at the outset would assist in keeping the threads of this complicated story straight.

Despite its complexity, *Immortal Africanus* is a well-written piece of historical fiction. Its themes of courage and frailty, love and murder, order and chaos will resonate.

NANCY WALKER (November 2, 2015)

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