

Setting: Dioklecijanova palača - Diocletian's Palace

An ancient palace built for the Roman Emperor Diocletian at the turn of the fourth century AD, that today forms about half the old town of Split, Croatia. While it is referred to as a "palace" because of its intended use as the retirement residence of Diocletian, the term can be misleading as the structure is massive and more resembles a large fortress: about half of it was for Diocletian's personal use, and the rest housed the military garrison.

Diocletian built the massive palace in preparation for his retirement on 1 May 305 AD. It lies in a bay on the south side of a short peninsula running out from the Dalmatian coast, four miles from Salona, the capital of the Roman province of Dalmatia. The terrain slopes gently seaward and is typical karst, consisting of low limestone ridges running east to west with marl in the clefts between them.



Reconstruction of Diocletian's Palace in its original appearance upon completion in AD 305 (viewed from the south-west). The Palace was decorated with numerous 3500-year-old granite sphinxes, originating from the site of Egyptian Pharaoh Thutmose III. Only three have survived the centuries. One is still on the Peristyle, the second sits headless in front of Jupiter's temple, and a third is in the city museum.

Story: The Split Beheading

Diocletian's victory at the Battle of Margus, alongside the banks of Serbia's Margus river, in July 285 was indeed a turning point. Vanquished were the much larger armies of Rome's false emperor Carinus, a scoundrel of sorts who had rendered the Senate powerless, while mistreating the womenfolk of his court and seducing the wives of his very own officers. Loyalty was by no means what kept Carinus' army together, but rather a sense of wait and hope for the day when one could ascend to the pinnacle of power by deposing the tyrant.

On that hot summer day when Diocletian removed Carinus from the stage of Roman power to thus restore political balance to the Empire, it was in fact one of Carinus' own centurions, the Praetorian Prefect Aristobulus, who felled him with his sword, avenging the shame that his commander had wreaked upon wives and daughters. In reward for his actions, Diocletian was to confer Aristobulus with the title not only of Praetorian Prefect, but of Consul.

"Aristobulus – your actions restored the honor of the Senate, and have brought you fame. You are not only the Praetorian Prefect, but Consul of Rome. Still I feel as if that does not suffice. I want to recognize you by granting you a personal wish." Diocletian knew that without Aristobulus on his side, his wars with Carinus might still be ravaging the lands. And without Aristobulus' powerful alliances from among the handful of Centurions that commanded Rome's Legions, there was no guarantee that Diocletian may have come out on top.

“Emperor – the one command that I would ask of you is that you grant this favor to my wife, Valeria, who has much need for renewed joy.”

“So be it, Aristobulus.”

Valeria was flattered to hear about the arrangement. She asked that Diocletian bring black granite sphinxes from Egypt to commemorate the grandiose victory over Carinus, who she hated with all of the intensity that a woman can have for such a vile lecher. Valeria wanted the sphinxes placed in the new palace that Diocletian was having built in Dalmatia, and envisioned that each Sphinx could represent one of the glorious battles that the Emperor had fought to bring the Roman Empire back under control.

When the crated sphinxes originating from the site of Egyptian Pharaoh Thutmose III arrived from Egypt, Valeria met with Diocletian, and asked to inspect these rare artifacts that had perhaps been crafted by the most talented stone masons that Egypt had ever produced. Upon seeing them uncrated shimmering under the Dalmatian Sun, she was in awe. They were far more transcendental than any monument she had ever seen, and triggered her utmost curiosity.

What exactly was it that these sphinxes represented? Human heads attached to lion bodies: did this represent the most intelligent species in nature – Homo Sapiens – enabled by the strongest and most resilient predator on the face of the Earth – Panthera Leo – ? Valeria knew that the term “sphinx” comes from ancient Greece to denote a creature of extreme cunning and strength, a concept that summoned a hybrid creature to get the best of brain tied to the fiercest of brawn, and in ancient Greek mythology the sphinx was portrayed with a woman’s head leading the wings of an eagle – a foreign monster that had entered into Greek mythology from Africa or Mesopotamia. The term had been adopted in Rome to describe this Egyptian chimera, the earliest one known consisting of the face of Queen Hetepheres II, (dated sometime between 2723 and 2563 BC). It’s believed that Egyptian pharaohs commissioned these monuments to proclaim their association with the solar deity Sekhmet who took the form of a lioness.

“Emperor – these are truly breathtaking monuments. I ask that the one Sphinx that your priests designate to commemorate the Battle of Margus be itself transformed.” Valeria coyly smiled.

“My Dear Valeria – you know what high esteem I hold you and Aristobulus in. The Empire owes both of you a debt of gratitude. Ask, my beautiful friend, ask, and then ask again.”

Valeria laughed, throwing her head back, taking-in the bluest Adriatic skies with her wide-open emerald colored eyes. The gods were laughing with her. She instantly returned to Earth, however, lest her wings of fancy be singed by the Immortals, and cupped a hand over her mouth to invoke a secret for the Emperor’s ear, and for the Emperor’s ear alone.

When after several long years had passed, and the Dalmatian Palace was finished, Diocletian’s court organized a formal celebration to consecrate the many temples, the Imperial residence, and the

ample marketplaces. Dignitaries came from around the Empire, and ambassadors had converged on Dalmatia, coming from all nations and principalities of the Empire's many allies. On the eve of this celebration Valeria told Aristobulus of the secret request that she had made of the Emperor when she had met with him years ago to inspect the arrival of some Egyptian sculptures.

"Aristobulus, my husband, what a grand celebration this will be. Tomorrow the Emperor is delivering on my secret wish. You and I shall have a day of everlasting triumph over darkness!" She couldn't help but burst with happiness, giddy like a bride upon hearing her groom say "I do."

"Tell me, Valeria – what is it about this celebration that has taken charge of your spirit? You're once again the same woman that brimmed with curiosity and wonder when I first met you, Vestal Virgin YOU, wrapped in transparent white linen, strolling along the beach at Oplontis on that hot summer August some 40 years ago. You seemed to me as descended from the very heavens of Venus."

"If I told you, husband, it wouldn't be a secret, now, would it?"

"No, I guess it wouldn't"... he gnawed thoughtfully on his right index finger's middle knuckle and wrinkled his nose, nostrils flaring before grinding out his reply... "but you could surely count on me returning the thrill of the moment back to you. I too have some spine-chilling secrets to tell about the inner workings of our Empire!"

"Save them for our retirement, husband. Be content that tomorrow will bring ecstasy." She whispered the last word in his ear... it tickled as it buzzed about his cochlea. She then bit his earlobe playfully. Fine traces of Valeria's saliva would quickly evaporate from his skin and blend into the balmy Dalmatian sea breeze. If back then, when the promise was made, Diocletian had experienced that same luscious whisper, no doubt that his libido would have been forever seduced by Valeria. Men are but moths to their woman's flame. But who knows... *can true Emperors be seduced?*

The next morning, on March fifteenth, signaling the Ides of March (*Idus Martiae*), brought overwhelming anticipation as the Sun's orb radiated over the newly minted Palace. The finely chiseled columns, friezes, and pediments became prey to light and dark "*chiaroscuro*", as Sekhmet rose toward apogee, placing the tremendous labors of legions of stonemasons on glorious display. The festivities commenced with the sounding of *cornus* at the crack of dawn, followed by melodious invocations by the priests and priestesses who had emerged from their temples to greet the crowds of visiting dignitaries arriving through the Silver Gate on the East side. By summoning their respective deities harmony would descend on the Palace. Diocletian hailed Jupiter, the supreme Roman god, who commanded sky, thunder, and the entire pantheon of gods, as his divine father. His Temple of Jupiter (*Jove*) dominated the Palace. Its pediment was a tribute to not only Jupiter, but to lesser gods like Sol and Triton, all portrayed in heroically divine struggles against the underworld.

Diocletian had broken away from his protocol with kings, queens and ambassadors to meet up with Aristobulus and Valeria at the entrance of his apartments. The Emperor had decided that today was the day he would honor fully the man who had precipitated his good fortune, the man who, in the heat of battle, had beheaded his relentless rival Carinus. Yes, Diocletian embodied Jove on Earth, and it

was he who decided the fate of his nobles. By recognizing Aristobulus before the assembled throng of patricians, they would realize that Aristobulus had meritoriously earned the rank of first among equals.



Entrance to the Imperial Apartments

“Valeria, how lovely! Your gaze is deep as the Adriatic, and your smile is fresh as morning dew. Aristobulus – I ask that you wear the sword that took down the tyrant. You have a ceremony to perform.”

“A ceremony, my Liege? Are you short on priests this ceremonious day?”

“Humor me, Consul. You’ll make history today.”

Aristobulus did a smart about face and trotted off as quickly as his veteran gait could deliver to the lavishly provisioned guest quarters that the Emperor had reserved for Valeria and him.

“Emperor – know that I have not uttered a word about the ceremony. This will catch him by surprise.” Valeria radiated not only proud satisfaction, but also an ingrained aura of power. It had been she who instinctively came up with the ritual that was about to be performed.

Diocletian knew that his wait would not be long. Still, he had enough time to converse with Valeria in private, out of Aristobulus' earshot. "You must also be rewarded through this ceremony, Valeria. Don't think for a second that this will play out exactly the way that you had planned."

Valeria bit her tongue, holding back her would-be expression of surprise when noticing how Aristobulus rushed back into the vestibule, breathing heavily – "Ready!" He wore the sword that had slain Carinus. He was instinctively grasping the handle encased in shark skin with his mighty right hand. Every muscle in his arm showed explosively tense, as if muscle-memory had overtaken his limb to represent the ferocity of the blow it had once dealt a tyrant in battle. This was the sword of a Centurion, a rather stubby straight blade with razor-sharp point and edges. It was designed for close combat, yet it was broad enough to destroy an opponent in one swift, decisive action. *That is precisely how Carinus fell* – it was one lightning-fast stroke that was dealt decisively onto, and entirely through, the nape of his neck. Carinus was instantly split in two, lips still quivering while the open throat exhaled air and scarlet gushes of life. Aristobulus had defiantly towered over the decapitated tyrant until exsanguination ended. He then cleaned the blood-drenched blade by disdainfully smearing it along Carinus' swarthy beard, head severed from torso, staring at the heavens with the same abandon as life taking flight from body. The warrior spit on the contorted, lifeless face of the tyrant that had ingratiated himself of Valeria during those ignominious days when Aristobulus, months of travel far-removed from Rome, fought out one victory after another in his difficult campaigns against the fiercest tribes of Vandals and Huns. Victories of sorts, but certainly ones that had to be frequently revisited since these tribes were now a constant menace along the boundaries of the Empire, while all the while, in Rome...

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The festivities ran day and night. As *Idus Martiae* was nearing extinction at midnight, the Emperor had all messengers announce that the culmination ceremony would be held at the Temple of Jove at precisely 23:45 hours of the night. Word spread throughout the Palace like St. Elmo's fire, electrifying all revelers, including those who had been dutifully worshiping their esteemed Bacchus since immediately following their evening repast.

"I have assembled all of you, my most honored guests, to witness the re-enactment of the birth of our present Empire, blessed by Jove, and entrusted to me, Diocletian, Progenitor of the Imperial Order of Rome. May our Republic impress its Seal of Pax Romana throughout the confines of civilization for centuries to come."

The regiment of *cornus* musicians sounded a four-note deep, melodious call signaling the presence of their Emperor, and in him – Jove himself. From the darkness of the Temple emerged two Priestesses with two strong attendants in their wake, one of them bearing a bundle of cured, gnarly olive wood, the other a barrel of olive oil. As the Priestesses invoked the presence and protection of Jove through their operatic intonations, the attendants built a pyre directly in front of the Sphinx that represented Diocletian's victory at Margus. Diocletian raised his wide arm-span to the heavens, cradling the razor-sharp sliver of Moon in his arms. The Moon was indeed beguiling tonight, expiring as it were in its ultimately last phase of a waning crescent, barely visible to the naked eye.

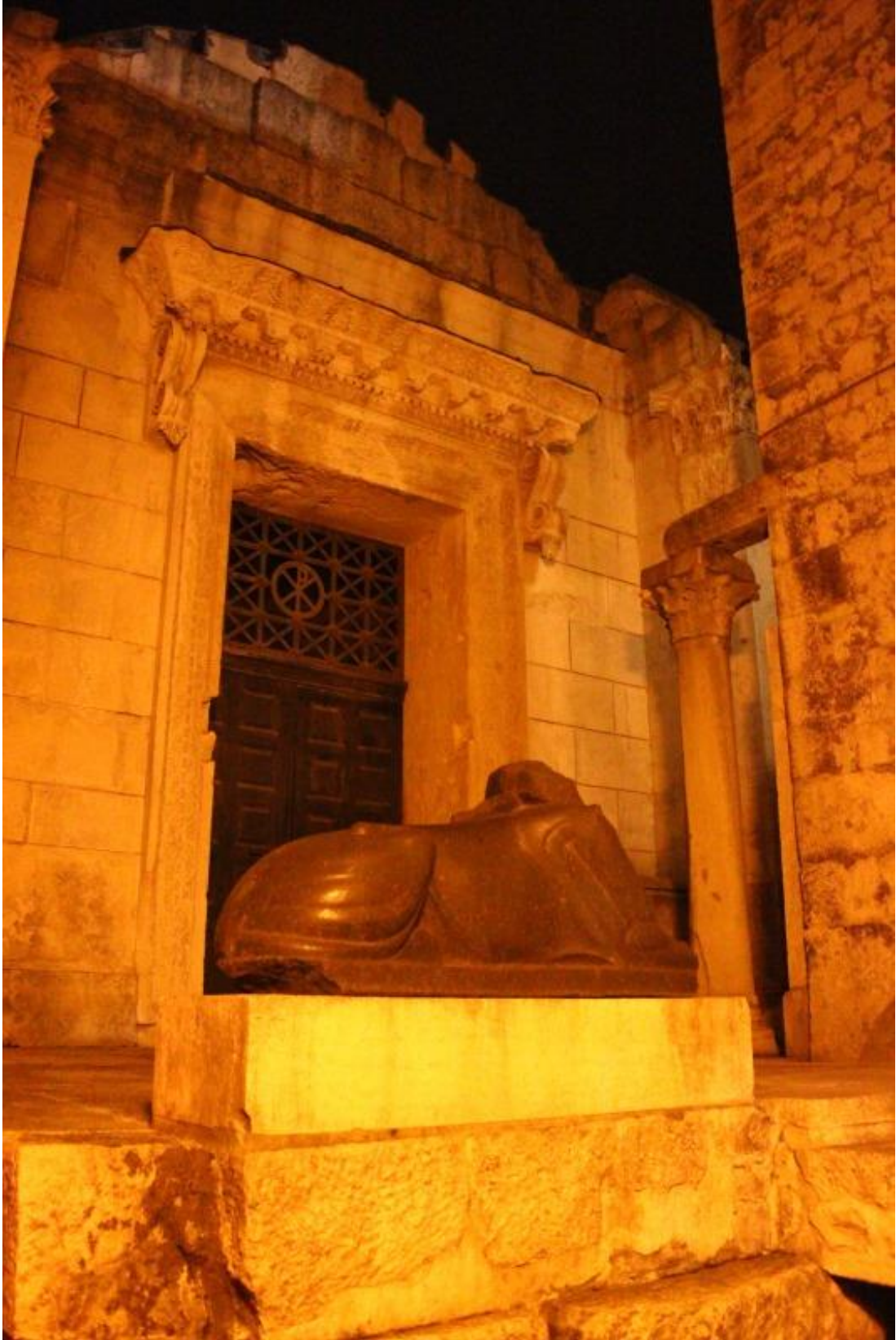
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Dalmatian folklore claims that the head of the Sphinx was then cast into the Sea to commemorate the Battle of Margus, and that Aristobulus and Valeria remained with Diocletian and the Empress at their Salona palace until the end of the lunar cycle.

At the conclusion of their vacation, all four of them agreed that Revenge is best savored on the rocks (of the Dalmatian coast).

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Jupiter's Temple and the Headless Sphinx of Split