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Arthas of Ugento

A journey through time among the Messapic walls



edizioni esperidi

Città di Ugento

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We welcome with great satisfaction the publication of this educational work, produced thanks to the qualified scientific expertise of the Institute of Heritage Science of the National Research Council (ISPC-CNR), Lecce Office. We express our heartfelt gratitude to the authors Fabio Fortinguerra and Giuseppe Scardozzi for conceiving and writing a text on the history of the Messapic walls of Ugento through a narrative arc spanning roughly 150 years - from their construction in the mid-4th century BC to their demolition starting from the late 3rd century BC - also drawing upon findings from recent archaeological excavations in the Cupa area, which received financial support from the Municipality.

The main goal of this work is to foster a sense of belonging and citizenship, particularly among young people, while representing a further significant step forward by the Municipal Administration in implementing Mission No. 5 on "*Protection and Enhancement of Cultural Heritage and Activities*". Presented alongside the general mandate guidelines in the Municipal Council on October 21, 2021, this mission formally acknowledged the continuation of efforts initiated in previous years to promote Ugento's heritage through wide-ranging publications, with the specific aim of expanding awareness of local Cultural Heritage in its broadest sense.

This publication therefore stands in direct continuity with the public archaeology initiatives carried out through the shared goals of the Municipality of Ugento and ISPC-CNR under the three-year operational agreement finalized on February 18, 2022, and renewed on March 13, 2025.

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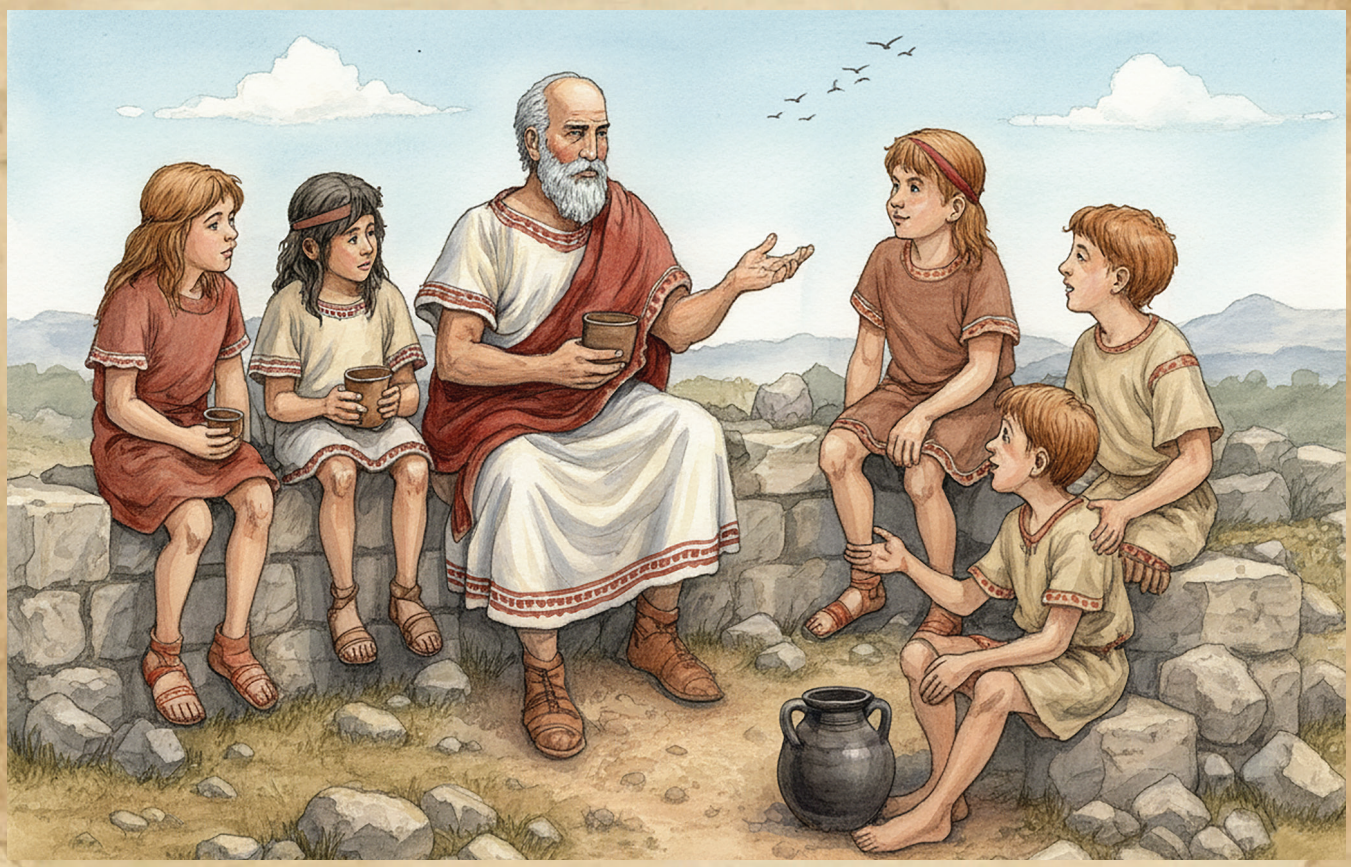
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The archaeological data are based on the results of the research activities conducted in Ugento by the Institute of Heritage Science of the National Research Council (ISPC-CNR).
The tale is a work of fiction stemming from the authors' imagination and it is set against the backdrop of real historical events. The narrative has been adapted and simplified with fictionalized elements for young readers.
All visual content, including the cover and interior illustrations, was generated via AI tools (Google Gemini and ChatGPT) using concepts, reference images, and original artwork supplied by the authors.
English text revised by Ivana Ingrosso.

This story begins about 2,200 years ago, in ancient Messapia, which corresponds to present-day Salento.
The year is 180 BC, on the outskirts of ancient Ozan, a large Messapic city known today as Ugento.
Old Arthas sits on the remains of the ancient walls that once surrounded the city. His skin is weathered by the sun and eyes sparkle with secrets.
Around him, a group of children listens open-mouthed.



«Dear children, if these stones could speak, they would tell you an incredible story filled with expert engineers and architects, epic battles and brave heroes who fought valiantly on them to defend our city, one of the largest and most powerful of Messapia».

«So were we really that important back then? And were these walls taller than they are now?» exclaimed little Anthis, jumping with excitement.

«You bet! - Arthas replied - Ozan was a rich and flourishing city. Its countryside was intensely cultivated, dotted with grazing flocks of sheep and herds of horses. Our nobles and merchants maintained cultural and commercial relationships with the Greeks of the homeland and of Magna Graecia.

The walls surrounding the city were truly imposing! Just imagine: they reached 7 to 8 metres in height and, even if climbed on each other's shoulders, you still couldn't reach the top!»

The children were amazed. How had their ancestors managed to build such a mighty city wall?

Arthas began his story.

«The Ugentines built the walls around the middle of the 4th century BC and the engineer who designed this imposing work was an ancestor of mine named Ziletes. The nobles entrusted him and his team a very tough task: to build a long and mighty circuit of walls that would enclose the city and defend it from external attacks.

Ziletes had to supervise all the work: design and trace the path of the walls, identify the quarries from which to extract the necessary blocks and coordinate the many teams of workers engaged in what would become one of the most monumental projects of the era».

«To the north-east and south-west of the city, not far away, there were large outcrops of a soft and easily workable stone, called calcarenite, which were exploited for the opening of wide quarries. Just try to imagine the noise» Arthas continued. «Numerous workers, armed with pickaxes, chisels, mallets and levers, struck the rock under the burning sun and quarried large square blocks from the stone faces. The work was extremely hard and exhausting, and Ziletes made sure that it was done with great care, selecting the finest and most regular blocks. The quarrymen slid them on large wooden logs onto sturdy carts pulled by horses, donkeys and oxen».

«And how did they lift them?» asked Anthis, full of curiosity.

«They used large wooden tripods, fitted with strong ropes that allowed the blocks to be raised and positioned for transport» replied Arthas.





«Long lines of carts, creaking under the sun, reached the various points of the wall route where the teams of workers were busy laying the blocks. In the sectors closest to the quarries and along the eastern side of the defensive circuit - where a ditch about 3 metres wide was dug - the walls were built using solid stone blocks through the entire thickness of the fortification.
However, in the western part of the city wall, where only very hard, compact limestone rock surfaced from the ground and could not be cut into blocks, another construction technique was used».

«Here - Arthas continued - two outer walls were built using the blocks from the quarries and the space in between was filled with earth and local stone (a technique called *émplekton*).
It was a long and arduous job that employed many men for over a year, but in the end Ozan, like the other Messapic cities of that period, had its imposing wall system: a circuit nearly 5 kilometres long with a thickness ranging between 3.40 and 4.60 metres.
Once completed, the walls enclosed an area of as much as 145 hectares!»



«Is 145 hectares a lot?» Anthis interrupted again.
«Yes, huge» replied Arthas. «Just think that back then, Ozan was by far the largest city in all Messapia.
Ziletes had carried out his task brilliantly, and the Ugentines showered him with honours».



The children listened with great interest as Arthas continued his tale.

«With the construction of the city walls, Ozan felt safe from any attack, even though those were years of tension between the Messapians and the Greeks of Taranto.

But on the horizon, a new and far more fearsome threat loomed from the north: Rome! Its strong, organized army was slowly expanding Roman territory into southern Italy. Between the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 3rd century BC, the Romans had reached the northern borders of Messapia.

Setting aside ancient rivalries, the Messapians and the Tarantines decided to ally against the common danger, which threatened to wipe out their freedom and independence forever».

«The Ugentines - Arthas continued - decided it was time to strengthen their defences. Fifty years after the construction of the walls, the nobles entrusted another ancestor of mine, Dazos, son of Ziletes, with a new mission: to make the fortifications even more impregnable. Dazos lost no time and, after careful evaluation, decided to line the outside with a new wall structure of large, regularly arranged calcarenite blocks. Like his father before him, Dazos supervised the work both in the quarry and at the construction site.

A reinforcement structure was also built on the inside of the walls, so that in some places they reached a thickness of 7 to 8 metres!»



«With such a wide base - Arthas explained - it was possible to make them even higher, and the external outer wall was better suited for withstand assaults from the Roman army’s fearsome siege engines».
The children were captivated by Arthas’s story as he went on to describe Ozan in the time of Dazos.
The city was completely surrounded by the mighty wall circuit, punctuated by several entrance gates that were often defended by towers.
Inside, the urban area was not entirely built up: besides houses, streets and squares, it contained places of worship, with temples and sacred enclosures featuring *cippus* (i.e. votive stones) and votive columns, like the one where, two centuries earlier, the ancient bronze statue of Zeus hurling a thunderbolt had been placed. There were also production sites, such as kilns for manufacturing pottery and roof tiles and workshops for metal working. Built-up spaces alternated with open areas intended for vegetable gardens and enclosures for animals. Large water reservoirs, created by taking advantage of natural hollows, also played a vital role.



«The walls reinforced by Dazos - Arthas resumed, his gaze distant with memories - were never attacked by the Romans, who in those years did not reach as far as southern Messapia».
The so-called *Bellum Sallentinum*, which pitted the Romans against the Messapians in 267-266 BC, mainly affected northern Messapia; southern cities, like Ozan, only provided contingents of infantry and cavalry.
The war however ended in defeat of the Messapians.
«After the Roman victory - Arthas specified - Ozan nevertheless retained a degree of administrative autonomy under an alliance treaty with Rome that required paying a tribute and sending military contingents when needed».



«An extraordinary event however was destined to change the course of history forever: Hannibal, a brave Carthaginian general, crossed the Alps in 218 BC at the head of a formidable army and marched down the Italian peninsula».
Thus began the Second Punic War.

«And what did the Romans do?» asked Anthis curiously, stroking a kitten that had wondered over to the children.
«Hannibal - Arthas replied - was a brilliant commander who surprised the Roman army with innovative battle tactics that even included war elephants. He won several battles and reached southern Italy».
In 216 BC, near the city of Cannae, in ancient northern Apulia, the Romans, having reorganized after their previous defeats, decided to face him in a pitched battle.



They assembled a massive army, but the Carthaginians, despite being outnumbered, defeated them using a pincer manoeuvre, thanks to Hannibal’s tactical genius. The Romans were surrounded and their army completely annihilated.



Hannibal used his weaker central infantry, to lure the Romans into a trap, while his cavalry and stronger infantry attacked their flanks and rear, trapping and massacring the Roman army. Over 50,000 men died in what is considered one of the greatest tactical victories in military history and one of Rome’s worst defeats, an unprecedented slaughter in which both consuls and numerous senators fell.

«After the battle of Cannae - Arthas resumed - many cities in southern Italy, previously allied with Rome, broke their treaties and sided with the Carthaginians in the hope of regaining their ancient independence and freedom. Among them there were several Messapic towns, like Manduria, and numerous Greek cities along the Ionian coast, the most important of which, was Taranto».

«In Taranto, the Roman garrison controlling the city refused to surrender and managed to barricade themselves in the acropolis, holding out against the continuous Carthaginian attacks».
At these words little Daza, who had been listening in silence until now, jumped up and exclaimed:
«And what about Ozan? What did Ozan do?»
Arthas, who knew the story well, grew sad and answered: «In Ozan there were days of heated discussions between those who wanted to honour the alliance with Rome and supply help, and those who, eager to regain their ancient freedom, wanted to side with Hannibal. The nobles, led at the time by old Vatios, met repeatedly to decide the best course for the future of the Ugentines.
Meanwhile the Carthaginians plundered the territories of the Messapians who refused to ally with them, raiding flocks and horses; the Roman State seemed on the brink of collapse. In the end, the decision was made: Ozan would side with Hannibal!»



Having heard Arthas's story, the children were even more curious and began asking the old man many questions.
Daza started: «Were you part of the council of nobles?»
«No, my little one - Arthas smiled - I was still too young to take part in the assembly, but I talked every day with my friends about what was best to do».



«And what did you think?» Daza asked.
Arthas replied: «I too feared Rome's reaction, but in my youthful enthusiasm I saw Hannibal and his epic military deeds as an unmissable chance for Ozan to regain its lost freedom and return to its ancient splendour».
«But did you meet Hannibal? And did he ever come to Ozan with his elephants?» said little Anthis, unable to contain himself any longer.

«No - Arthas replied - I never saw Hannibal or the Carthaginians in the city, let alone his elephants. But more than once their ships, both warships and transport vessels, docked at our port to resupply».

The port of Ozan was located where Torre San Giovanni stands today, taking advantage of the coastal lagoon that existed then back. It was an important trading port, in use since archaic times, where Messapic and Greek merchants met.

After Hannibal's capture of Taranto (213/212 BC), the port of Ugento played a strategic role in controlling the Ionian coast together with the other Greek port cities that, like Ozan, had joined Hannibal: Metaponto, Heraclea (today Policoro) and Thurii (near Sibari).

These were very important ports of call for Hannibal, who used them to dock ships coming from Carthage with supplies for his army and as military control points for the entire Gulf of Taranto.





In the meantime, the Romans had reorganized and formed a new army in Brindisi. Arthas, recalling the events that had marked his youth, continued: «Despite the hard blow at Cannae, Rome did not give up and reacted with great vehemence. It entrusted the arduous task of winning back the Messapic and Greek territories that had joined Hannibal to one of its bravest commanders: Quintus Fabius Maximus».

He was a general famous for his strategy of delay and attrition, which earned him the nickname of *Cunctator* (the Delayer). During the Second Punic War, instead of facing Hannibal in open battle, he followed him through southern Italy, wearing down his forces with small skirmishes. His goal was to exhaust the Carthaginians, avoid further defeats and give Rome time to reorganize after the disaster at Cannae.

In 209 BC, Quintus Fabius Maximus moved from Brindisi with his army and, after bloody battles, conquered first Manduria and then Taranto, plundering them and enslaving part of the population. As further punishment he ordered the city walls of both towns to be demolished.



«After the fall of Manduria and Taranto - Arthas continued - many Ugentines began to fear that siding with Hannibal had been a mistake. Rome would take revenge!
And indeed, Quintus Fabius Maximus set sail from Taranto and marched down the coast with his army, quickly capturing our port.
At that point, all the fighters of Ozan barricaded themselves behind the city walls, preparing for battle.
The Romans landed from their ships and soon came in sight of our city’s fortifications, transporting their deadly siege engines: tall wooden towers to scale the walls, massive battering rams to breach them and catapults to throw heavy stone balls».

Arthas’s storytelling grew even more pressing. «My comrades-in-arms and I were waiting for them on the walls, ready to defend our city with all our strength.



The Romans attacked shortly before dawn, advancing slowly and hurling against us large stones and flaming projectiles that streaked across the sky, lighting up the night. We fought back with dozens of javelins. Our fearsome archers shot hundreds of arrows that hit the enemies with precision. Despite our strenuous resistance, the highly organized Roman army did not retreat.

At first light, we were hit by a rain of tiny, almost invisible projectiles. I saw my friends fall one after another beside me, without knowing what was hitting them. We were disoriented and frightened. We took cover under our shields and behind the walls».

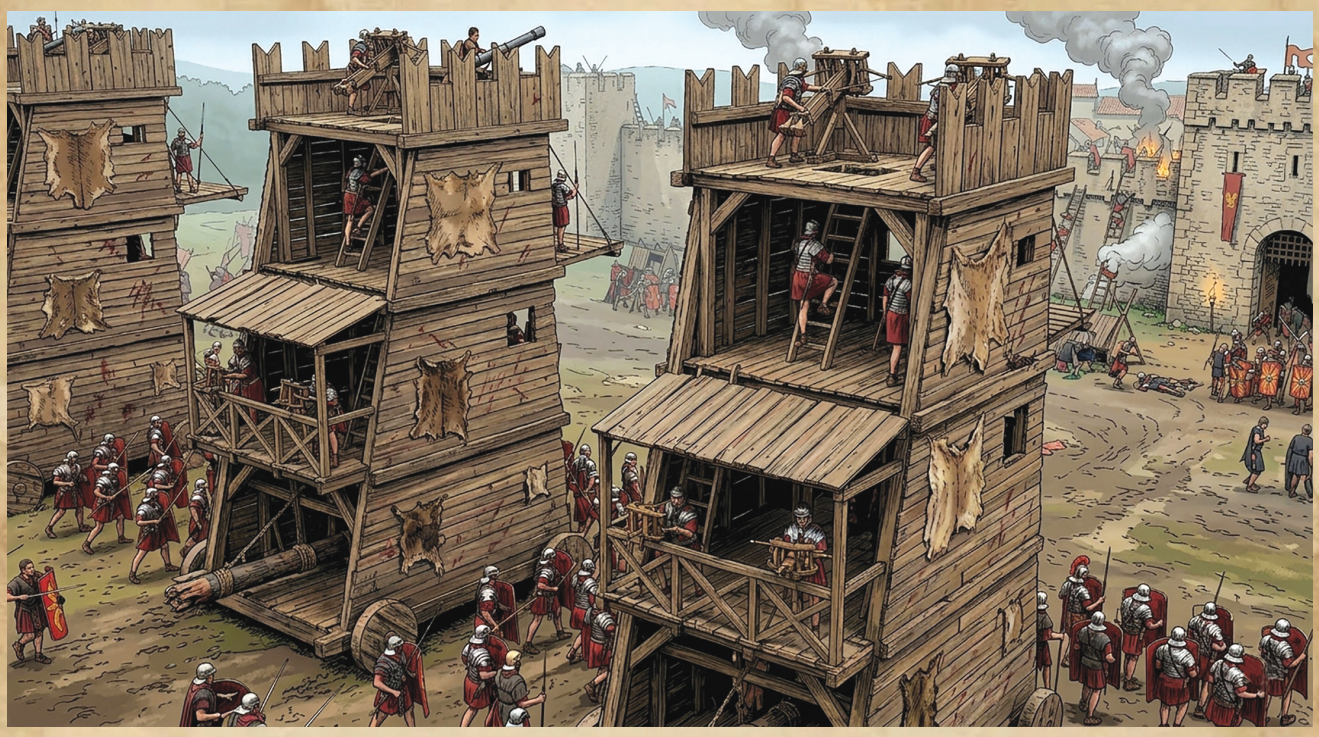


«After a moment we realized what was happening:
we were under attack by the slingers!»
They were a special body of the Roman artillery, armed with a particular type of slings (known as *frombole*), used to throw not only stones, but also deadly acorn-shaped lead bullets, (called *glandes* or "acorn missiles"), with pointed ends. These lethal weapons could be thrown from long range and reach speeds, high enough to pierce helmets. The slingers carried them in small shoulders bags.

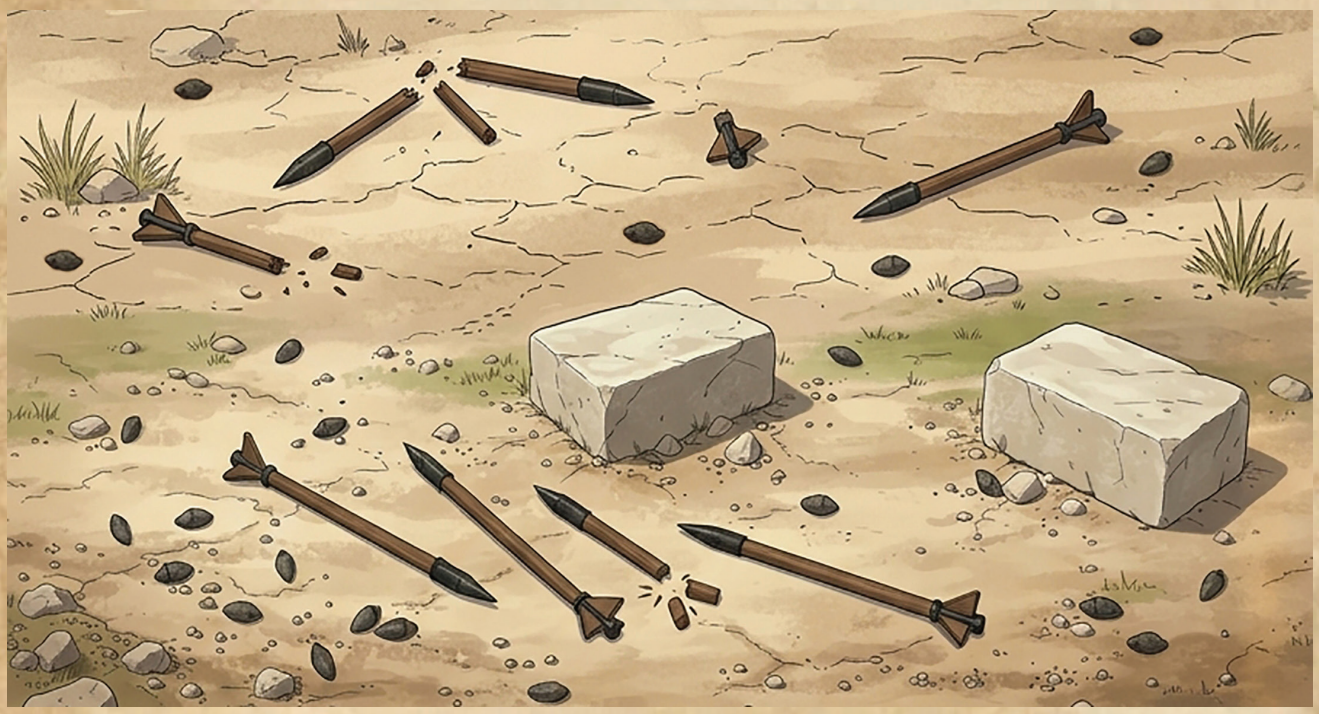


«Defending ourselves against the Roman army was an impossible task - Arthas continued despondently.
In addition to the acorn missiles, they shot deadly iron tipped darts from ingenious war machines, a kind of large wooden and metal crossbow called *scorpio*».



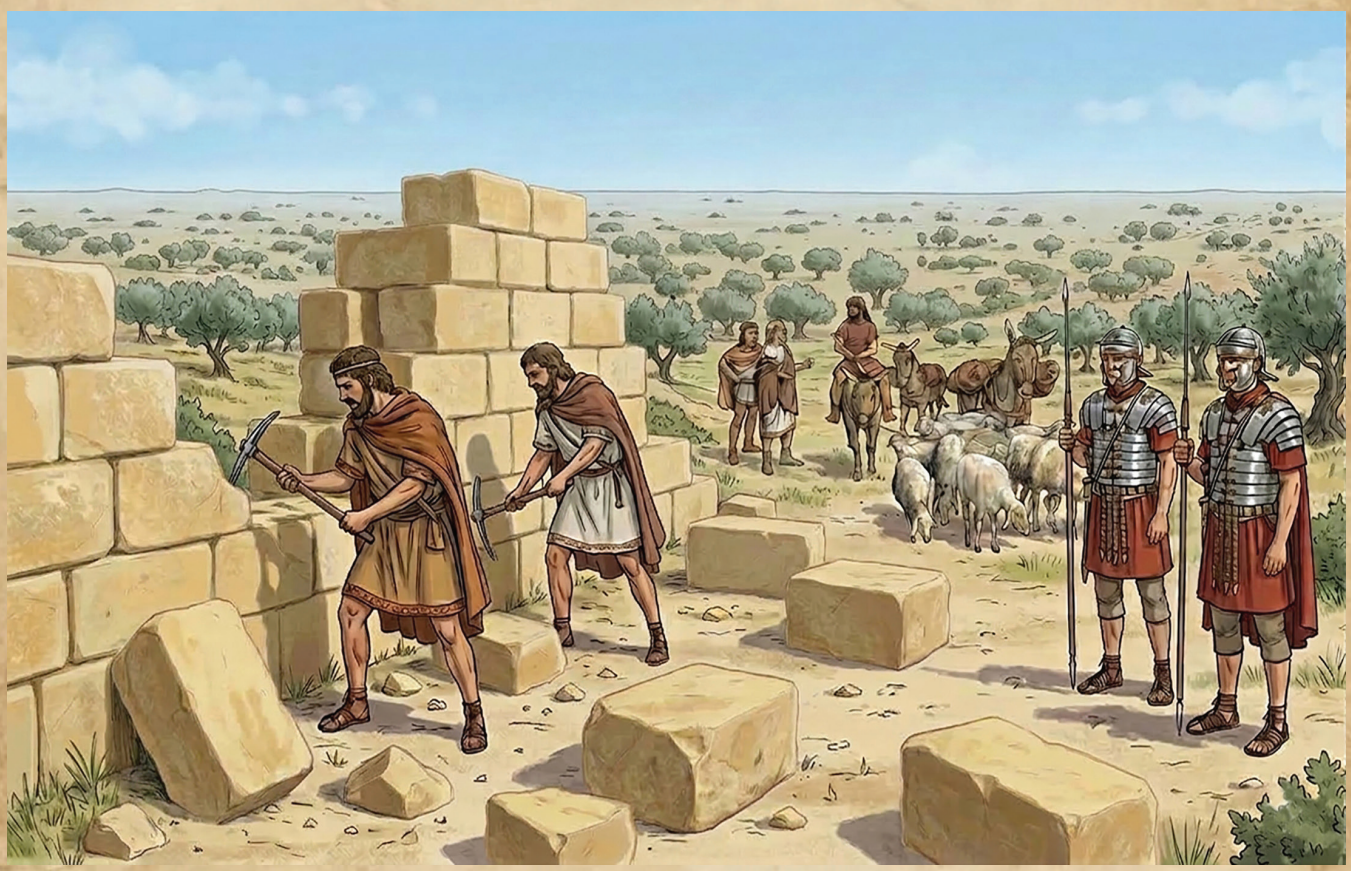


«We offered a strenuous resistance, but in the end, we were overwhelmed by Rome’s power. At the end of the fight, the battlefield outside the walls was carpeted with stones, acorns and darts, that had struck the fortifications and fallen to the ground».

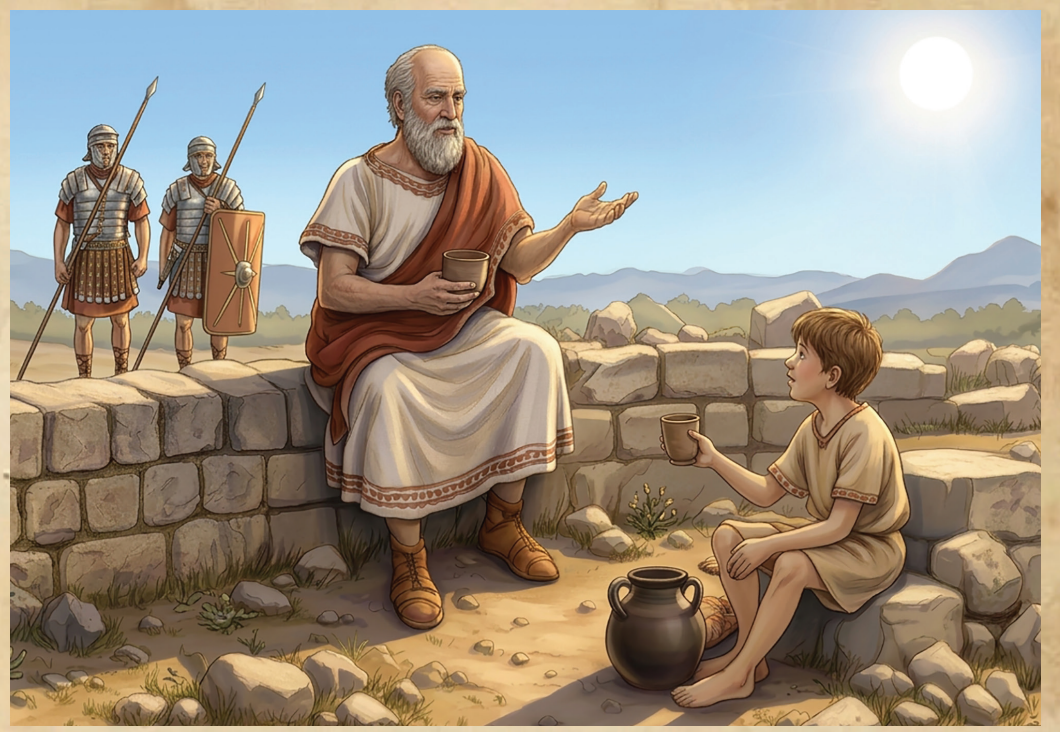


«So were we defeated? Wasn’t the mighty wall able to defend us?» little Anthis pressed him, worried for his city’s fate.

Arthas explained: «Ozan lost its battle against Rome. Hannibal and the Carthaginians had left Messapia, retreating to nearby Calabria. But the Ugentines had fought with great valour and the walls, they had so wisely built, had proven to be an effective defence. However,
the Romans possessed more powerful weapons and a superior military strategy».
«And what happened then?» Anthis asked again.



With shiny eyes, Arthas replied: «After our defeat, as they had done in Manduria and Taranto, the Romans forced us to demolish our walls. Those powerful fortifications, the symbol and pride of Ozan, were to be no more.
It was a punishment meant as a tangible sign of Ozan’s definitive submission to Rome».



The day had flown by like a puff of wind, and the sun was beginning to set. In the distance the voices of the mothers could be heard calling the children for dinner. Everyone ran away, except little Anthis. He had remained there with his heavy water jar, enchanted by the tale of the old warrior. He wanted to hear his last words before returning home to tell his family the extraordinary story of his city. Taking his leave from Anthis, Arthas concluded:

«Do not be sad for what you have heard, my little one. Even if times have changed and now, we are part of the Roman State, Ozan will continue to be an important and flourishing city. We have lived in peace for years now and so it will be also in the future».

Then the old man pointed to the large blocks of stone they were sitting on.

«Remember: we must never forget who we are. We must know our history and be always aware of our identity. These stones you play on today will stay here forever as silent witnesses. Centuries will pass and other children like you will sit here, listen to this story, make it their own and continue to tell it to those who come after them».