

Excerpt from I DELITTI DELLA LUCE (The Luminance Conspiracy)  
by Giulio Leoni (Mondadori, 2005)

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### Synopsis

*Around the year 1240, the Emperor Frederick II assembles the foremost thinkers of his time at his court in Sicily to discover the real shape of the Universe and to demonstrate that Scripture is wrong. Mysterious forces prevent the success of his prideful endeavors, however, and he dies before he can complete his quest. Years later, in 1300, the poet Dante Alighieri, a Prior of the city of Florence, is working on the final, most difficult part of his Divine Comedy. Dante's imagination is stalled, and he is unable to find something that might render the supreme beatitude and visible appearance of the heavens with any exactitude. Two things come to his aid: a manuscript in the care of a Saracen slave, the rare Liber scalae Machometi, that narrates Mohammed's journey through the realm of shadows to reach the divine throne; and the ambitious and apparently impossible desire of Frederick II to know "God's greatness" that will show the Poet how to represent God's glory.*

*Meanwhile strange things begin to occur in the city. There is the strange, unknown device, a kind of machine with toothed wheels, salvaged from a galley that has run aground in the marshes of the Arno. Where did the boat and its horrifying cargo of dead crewmen come from? Who had tried to smash the strange machine and why? And there is the appearance of a puzzling relic, the Virgin of Antiochia, apparently capable of supernatural powers: what force keeps her seemingly alive? Whispers spread about a treasure linked to Frederick and about a descendant of his who is prepared to fight against Pope Boniface with the backing of several Roman families. An unusual cargo of outsized mirrors arrives, and plans and designs representing octagons are found everywhere.*

*And the crimes begin: the Emperor's architect falls victim to two mortal blows, while the learned men who take up Frederick's old obsession are killed one after the other. Why is Frederick II's architect, the man who designed the mysterious and apparently senseless castello in the middle of nowhere, found savagely murdered in one of the towers of the old walls? It seems a specter has emerged from the past: the Emperor, insatiable and relentless in his search for knowledge, had died on the brink of a final, extraordinary revelation. Now others are on that same path to knowledge and the course is about to come full circle, dictated by the cold precision of the stars. As the city falls into a spiral of homicides that will bring it to the verge of civil war, Dante turns to the pages of an astrological work that should not exist. Obscure traces link the current events to Frederick II's arrogant challenge: maybe Dante needs only to solve the Emperor's last riddle to find the murderer...*

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*Palermo, summer 1240*

*The glow of sunset filtered through the foliage, lighting up the golden skin of the lemons.*

*In the garden, enclosed by an arcade of marble columns, an intense perfume of flowers wafted through the*

air, borne on a breeze that came from the sea.

The emperor, reclining against purple cushions, had been absent-mindedly tracing geometric designs in the soil with a small branch. Reaching out a hand to pick up a citron that lay on the ground, he held it up to the younger man who stood beside him.

“So this is how the earth is formed?” he asked after a moment’s thought.

“A solid sphere, curved all around” confirmed Guido Bonatti, the court astrologer.

Frederick pondered those words. Then he abruptly opened his fingers, letting the fruit drop. “What holds it up then?” he went on, turning to his other fellow thinker who was sitting a little distance away. The man was fair, with reddish hair and a face covered with freckles.

“The hand of God” replied Christianity’s foremost man of science, and the pride of Frederick’s court, Michael Scot. A man as slight as one of the river reeds that supported the pergola of vines.

“And how high are the heavens where God resides? Can you tell me, Guido?”

“As high as the light of God can reach, your majesty” the astrologer replied, picking up the fruit with his left hand.

“And what lies beyond the light?”

“Beyond it there is only darkness. As Scripture tells us, what remained after the light was created” Michael Scot replied, pointing a finger up above.

An enigmatic smile lit up Frederick’s face. Not far away, a man wearing the coarse habit of the Friar Minors had been observing the scene in silence.

The emperor turned to him. “Tell me its measure, brother Elia. The measure of God’s greatness.”

*The morning of August 5, 1300, the marshes west of Florence*

They had left the horses near a cottage on the road to Pisa, the sun already high in the sky. From there they had headed toward the bed of the river that flowed a few leagues away, invisible among the cane beds and clumps of marsh vegetation.

The small column had been trudging through the waterlogged ground for over two hours, hindered by their heavy suits of armor, looking for a way through the quagmire. At the head of the column, Dante Alighieri, wearing the insignia of his priorship, was about twenty steps ahead of the group.

“Prior, wait, slow down. Why such a hurry?” wheezed the bargello, breathing heavily. The thickset man, wearing armor that made him even more ungainly, slipped and slid in his attempt to catch up with the prior.

A small stream was obstructing the way. Dante turned, wiping the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. Then with a determined gesture he gathered the hem of his garment up over his knees and forded the brook, followed by the others. Up ahead a rise in the terrain, covered with shrubs, concealed the horizon.

“There’s the tower of Santa Croce... we should be almost there, by now” the captain of the guard panted,

pointing to a structure in the distance.

The prior had stopped a little further on, halfway up the slope, and was intent on wiping slime and mud off his boots.

With a grimace of disgust he plucked a leech off his calf, hurling it some distance away. A thin trickle of blood marked the skin at the spot where the sucker had bitten the flesh. He rinsed the wound with a little water, then stared impatiently at the clumsy moves of the bargello who was floundering along, trying to catch up with him.

“Well then, where is it?”

In front of them, through an opening in the reed beds, the banks of the Arno could be glimpsed. Further on the river disappeared from view again, curving in a bend concealed by a rise in the terrain.

“It must be over there... behind that scrub.”

Dante looked in the direction the captain was pointing to. The slimy slope seemed to want to drag him back downwards. For the last few steps he had had to pull himself along with his hands, grabbing onto the prickly tufts that covered the top of the dune. Then at last he was able to get a glimpse of the other side.

Approximately three hundred feet away, a dark form lay aground on the gravelly shore, partly hidden by vegetation.

“So it was true... there it is” the bargello stammered.

Dante, too, found it hard to believe his eyes. Slightly listing on its side, a war galley was resting against the river bank, its entire tier of oars extended as if it were about to put out to sea.

“The devil must have piloted it here” the bargello murmured with a shiver. Dante was unable to suppress a smile. He knew very well the tales that circulated about that place. But if the devil really was there, at least he would see what he was made of.

“There’s no one to be seen on board. It appears to be abandoned” one of the guards observed.

“Indeed, there is no sign of life” the poet confirmed, scanning the deserted forecastle. No one could be made out along the narrow central passageway, and no one was at the helm. The ship looked to be in perfect condition, as if it had just reached the landing, its large lateen sail neatly folded on the boom. He felt a shiver run down his back. It was inconceivable to think that the Arno, several miles from its mouth, might still be navigable for such a large craft. That presence was... well, it was impossible. He looked for some sign that might reveal its provenance, but only a black cloth hung limply from the mast.

“Let’s go closer. I must see... and find out” he said. He set off quickly down the slope, plunging into the swamp again, followed reluctantly by the others.

He had snatched a sword from the hand of one of the men and, submerged in water up to his knees, was heatedly slashing at the plants to clear the way. Trickle of sweat ran down his body, but the excitement of the discovery seemed to have wiped away any fatigue.

At first he was unable to see where he was going. Then he delivered one final blow and stopped with a jolt. Behind him rose the horrified shouts of the bargellini.

A bearded giant had materialized before him, more than twelve feet tall. On his monstrous head, adorned with a crown, two hideous, opposite faces scanned the entire horizon with twin malevolent gazes. The giant was seated on a massive carved shaft that ended in a bronze tip half-hidden in the mud of the gravelly shore.

An insistent drone hummed in the air. The insects, that had tormented them for the entire march, seemed even more numerous and more aggressive now. They encircled the head of the giant figurehead like a loathsome cloud.

“Beelzebub, lord of the flies” Dante murmured, waving a swarm away with disgust.

A gust of wind swept the air, carrying with it the atrocious stench of decomposition. “We must go on board” the prior decided, after a moment’s hesitation.

At the prow, a rope ladder hung from the anchor cable. Dante covered his mouth and nose with the veil of his stiff square cap, then hoisted himself up on the remains of the severed spur and from there began climbing laboriously up the ship’s bulwark. Halfway up he turned and looked behind him, urging on the bargello who continued staring at the figurehead with a dazed expression. He waited for the man to begin climbing, and with one final effort, pulled himself up on the deck.

The captain of the guard had also reached the deck, puffing and panting. He moved beside him, so he too could see, then brought his hand to his mouth, stifling a gag. “But they are...”

“They are dead. Just as your men had said.”

Dozens of oarsmen, lined up on their benches, seemed intent on a macabre parody, bent over their oars as though in a convulsive effort to row. Towards the stern, other shapes lay supine, around the rudder. The bodies were swollen and covered with an oily sludge, as if they had lain exposed to the scorching sun for a number of days.

He looked around in confusion. A blast of warm wind swept over the deck, causing a whiff of air tainted with putrefaction to rise from the benches. “There is the plague, on board!” the bargello whispered, trying to protect himself with his hand against the stench rising from below.

Dante shook his head. That ship must have maneuvered with extreme skill in order to follow the river’s course up to there. How could it have done so if the crew had fallen prey to disease? No, the cause of that hecatomb was undoubtedly something else. Death must have roamed around on board like a silent guest, its claws scratching at length, before striking. He raised his eyes, attracted by the flapping of the cloth on the mast. Before the flag went limp again, he just had time to glimpse the image of a skull above two crossbones.

In the middle of the deck was a hatch, leading to the hold. Perhaps the ship’s cargo would reveal its mystery. Picking up a wooden shaft, he quickly wrapped it with a strip of tarpaulin that was lying on the deck. With a few flint strikes he lit the improvised torch, then leaned into the opening, lighting the way.

He did not see any gear, yards or spare sails, any kind of food provisions, nor any wine or water supplies. No quarters for the crew, no kitchen, no weaponry. Even the ballast weights had been discarded, transforming the galley into a great empty hull.

It seemed that the captain’s only concern had been to minimize the load and decrease the draft as much as possible, to be able to go up the river. He turned his gaze towards the aft wardroom, below the quarterdeck. The door of the captain’s quarters was swinging slightly, as if someone inside were inviting him to enter.

The cabin was submerged in shadow. In the middle of the room, under an iron candelabrum that hung over their heads, three men sat motionless around a small table, sprawled on ornate seats, wine goblets at hand; they looked as if they had just broken off a conversation, overcome by sudden sleep. There was a heap of metallic fragments at their feet, in the center of a pool of light.

Curious, Dante bent down and brought the torch closer. It appeared to be some kind of machine spiked with levers and toothed wheels, on whose polished wood and brass surfaces the flame kindled a thousand reflections. It was about two feet high, of perhaps the same width and length, but it was not easy to form a precise idea of its original appearance, since someone must have struck it forcefully, smashing it to pieces. The axe used for the destructive act was still on the ground.

He picked up one of the wheels, testing the sharpness of its keen-edged teeth against his fingers. There were tiny characters along the rim, that he was not able to decipher.

At that moment the galley swayed with a groan, as if an unexpected eddy had been created in the river.

The bargello had approached and was looking around, bewildered. “But... they are Saracens! All dead” he exclaimed, not paying any attention to the wrecked machine.

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