

The Fire Waker

Ben Pastor

St. Martin's Minotaur

It's 304 C.E. The Roman Emperor Diocletian's official historian, his eyes and ears in the far-flung corners of the divided empire, and a fierce soldier, Aelius Spartianus is carrying messages for Diocletian when he receives word from his friend and erstwhile enemy, the Jew Baruch ben Matthias, of a miracle.

A Christian brick maker has died and been resurrected by a Christian holy man. As Christians are being thrown to bears and lions in some parts of the empire, this is worth looking into. But when Aelius goes to investigate, the brick maker is dead again, murdered this time.

Continuing on his way to deliver a message to the Emperor Maximian (the empire is under divided rule and the emperors Maximian and Constantius are scheduled to abdicate), Aelius soon finds himself tangled in another murder. A judge, this time, one who had been lenient with Christians, killed in a little-used public bath.

There are a number of suspects, but before Aelius can sort them out, the bath's Christian slaves have been arrested, Aelius is attacked in a public inn, and a rich and sinister Roman soldier-politician has taken an interest in him.

The Roman politics are hopelessly complicated but the setting is richly populated with plebes, slaves, soldiers and aristocrats, with their respective garb, food, positions and abodes. Pastor brings alive the times, giving the plight of women a prominent place in the story and in Aelius' mind. Aelius is an engaging, resourceful, dogged and principled character and readers will hope he has a long and adventurous life.

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