

## [Transcript] Conversations / From Antioch, to Syracuse and Tyre

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There's this great moment in the classic movie, Patten, where the US General's riding a jeep into Sicily during World War II.

And Patten says to his aide that the Americans are just the latest intruders on an island that's been invaded by the ancient Greeks, the Carthaginians, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Arabs, and the Normans.

Sicily is like a layer cake of history going back thousands of years.

And people who want to feel a glimmer of the ancient world will often head to places like Rome, or Jerusalem, or Athens, but Catherine Pangonis likes to go to the other cities on the Mediterranean.

Cities that are mentioned repeatedly in the Bible or in other ancient texts.

But these are places that tourists rarely visit.

In fact, most people might not even be aware these forgotten cities still exist.

Catherine Pangonis is a UK historian and author who's travelled round the Mediterranean Sea that touches the shores of three continents.

She's walked on the stones of ancient Antioch, Syracuse, Carthage, and the Phoenician city of Tyre.

At one time, these cities were famed for their beauty and wealth and for their majesty.

They were centres of art and trade and religion where people from all over the ancient world could gather.

Each of these great and powerful cities has been worn down over the last few thousand years by war and earthquakes and neglect,

but they still carry magical resonance for Catherine.

Catherine Pangonis' book is called

Twilight Cities Lost Capitals of the Mediterranean.

Hi, Catherine.

Hi, thank you so much for having me.

Someone looking at a map of the Mediterranean world might imagine that the Mediterranean is something that holds Europe and Asia and Africa apart,

but that's not how people in the ancient world saw it, is it?

No, and I don't think it's how we should see it now.

I think the Mediterranean Sea is absolutely a force of connection

and it's a conduit of trade and cultural exchange  
and it always has been.  
From the point of view of archaeologists and historians,  
I mean, archaeologists love their pottery.  
And you find pottery in Europe that came from the shores of Asia  
and North Africa and vice versa.  
And of course, the sea is scattered with islands.  
And these islands, in particular, you've mentioned Sicily,  
these islands become crossing places  
and stepping stones across the sea.  
So I think really, both in terms of antiquity and the modern day,  
we should try and see the sea more of a force of connection  
than something divisive, because it's formed  
the shared horizons of so many cultures since the dawn of history.  
You write that your introduction to these cities,  
or indeed your fascination with these cities,  
began quite some years ago when you had a kind of a very dramatic  
and drenching introduction to Sicily.  
Can you tell that story, please?  
Yeah, it really is where it all started.  
I mean, I'm from London.  
You know, I grew up with a lot of kids around me  
going on holidays to Mediterranean places  
and my family just didn't really do that.  
My first time going to the med was with my sailing team from uni.  
We were sort of given a job to bring a boat  
from one part of Sicily to another.  
And, you know, we weren't the most responsible team.  
So we had so many, so many issues on the way  
with this poor boat, that it really got trashed.  
We tore the mainsail, we lost the end.  
I mean, it wasn't just our fault.  
I mean, the ancient Greeks, you'll be familiar,  
I think, with Scylla and Charybdis, you know,  
this mythical monster and clashing and whirlpool  
just off the coast of Sicily.  
And the Greeks had this very helpful habit  
of situating gods and monsters in dangerous places.  
So Sicily has always been a very difficult region to sail in.  
And we just sort of thought, you know,  
going on sort of a happy-go-lucky sailing trip,  
we didn't really quite take all these issues,  
the tempestuous nature of the winds,  
the changeability of conditions into account.

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And eventually it ended up with us sort of limping into the harbor of Syracuse, where the torn mainsail, no anchor, broken engine, sort of desperate to find a technician and a sail mender. And I was furious with everyone on the boat. We were all furious with each other, as only sort of three days in a storm at sea can do. And I was blown away by what I found. You know, I sort of stumbled off the boat, sort of hungry, frustrated, whatever. And I just looked up and I saw this city that was sort of glowing gold, because it was sunset when we arrived. And I had no idea what to expect. And just walking through, you just suddenly became aware all these layers of history that are sort of written in the architecture and the stones of this place and all these different languages you still hear in the streets. And it just, yeah, that's what made me want to go and do sort of my masters focusing on Mediterranean history and led to this book eventually. When we use the word city in ancient terms, what do we mean by an ancient city? Because these are much smaller cities or settlements than the cities we live in today. Yeah, much smaller, much, much smaller. And I think, you know, it's only in the last like 50 years, certainly less than a century, that humans can claim to be more urban than rural. We think of antiquity as the world being dominated by cities, but we have to remember that only about 10% of the global population lived in them. And I think, you know, the reason cities loom large in our minds, despite being, you know, a very different beast to what they are now, is because they were the center of ideas and politics, and it's also where rulers could make the marks of their empire. So, you know, architecture was a very important tool of imperial propaganda. Building impressive temples showed power, showed continuity, this sort of thing.

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So cities were very important ideologically,  
but they weren't sort of the huge urban sprawls  
that we know today.  
Even the biggest cities of the ancient world,  
like Rome, was a million people at its peak, that's all.  
That's smaller than Adelaide's population today,  
which seems extraordinary to me.  
But I suppose it was a city of place with a temple,  
and walls, for example,  
or in some kind of bureaucracy at the heart of it.  
I mean, it varies different cultures  
in different time periods, but yes,  
broadly speaking, I would say, I mean, an ancient city,  
they focus around sort of a major temple complex  
at the center, and they're usually fortified in some way,  
because there's a lot of sieges that happen to cities  
in the ancient world, and walls,  
walls really help with that.  
Your book starts with the impossibly ancient city of Tyre,  
or Tyre, as you say the French call it,  
on the Mediterranean.  
Where is this city on today's map,  
and what does it look like today, Catherine?  
It's about as far south as you can go in modern-day Lebanon,  
very near the blue line,  
the sort of UN-monitored boundary  
between Israeli-Lebanese territories.  
So it's sort of about as far east  
in the Mediterranean as you can go,  
and it sits on this peninsula,  
so that juts out from the coastline of Lebanon  
into the Mediterranean,  
because when Tyre was founded in antiquity,  
it was on an island, and for reasons like,  
I hope we'll come to,  
it eventually became connected to the mainland,  
but it didn't start this way,  
and so today, Tyre is an urban sprawl.  
It doesn't occupy just the land that was once the island,  
but it spreads onto the mainland now.  
But my favorite part of Tyre  
is that that area that was the island,  
the ancient city that juts out into the sea,  
and when you're there, you still very much feel

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like you're standing on an island,  
because even though it's connected to the mainland now,  
the sea is around you on the three sides,  
and the sea is a huge part of Tyre's identity,  
both in antiquity and the modern day.  
Now, you have spatterings of high rises,  
and you have the marks of civilizations that came later.  
You have buildings from the Crusader period  
from the Ottoman period.  
You have buildings that were destroyed by the Mamluks,  
and indeed, a lot of the ancient buildings of Roman Tyre  
and of medieval Tyre were pulled down,  
and the stones were used for more modern buildings.  
So it's sort of a hickaldy-pickaldy landscape  
with different civilizations.  
You know, Roman columns and Byzantine columns  
sticking out of the sea.  
You go for a drink and a beach bar,  
and there'll be a Byzantine column being used  
as a chair or a bench or something.  
The antiquity is everywhere.  
You mentioned the columns there.  
One of the most striking things to read  
is that one of the best ways to experience the ancient world  
is to go to the beach and go for a swim with some goggles on.  
What sort of things did you see when you went  
below the waves off the beach of Tyre?  
Well, columns.  
The columns are the impressive ones  
because they are so clear,  
and it's so obvious what they are.  
And there's this whole area just off the coast,  
which archaeologists know as the submerged quarter.  
And there's this archaeological site called Elmina,  
which is basically the centre of Roman Tyre,  
the Roman metropolis.  
And it has this gorgeous white processional road  
flanked by colonnades that leads out to the sea,  
and it's beautiful.  
But in antiquity, that road went even further  
to this other quarter of the city,  
which is now under the sea.  
And you can swim over those ruins.  
I won't lie, it's not recognisable as a city.

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You know, it's not sort of like swimming around a shipwreck, and you can see different rooms. It's not, you know, it's been under the sea for thousands of years. But you can see traces of walls. You can see traces of columns. Further along, you can see the jetty stones that made up the Phoenician harbour that where the Phoenicians launched their ships from. And it's all very close to the surface. You know, you don't really need scuba equipment just to take a look. And that's sort of what's amazing. The ancient Phoenicians were the people who built the city of Tyre, and they came to power sometime around the Babylonian Age. It's that old. And they're mentioned, and the city is cursed in the Old Testament. What made the people of Tyre so distinctive for their time? It's very difficult to say much with absolute certainty about the Phoenicians. And there's even this big debate about whether we should even use the term Phoenician for this civilization collectively, because they never identified as Phoenicians. They would have identified as men of Tyre, or men of Sidon, or men of Arawad, these different Phoenician settlements up and down the Lebanese coast. But what made them distinctive was they were famous as master craftsmen. So you've mentioned the Old Testament. Sort of the golden age of Tyre comes under King Hiram in the first millennium BC. And Hiram is recorded as sending architects and craftsmen and skilled weavers and dyers to Solomon in Israel. So they had this relationship of exchange with the kings of Israel. And when Solomon wanted to build his temple, he asked for architects from Tyre. So they were known as these master craftsmen and architects. But more than that,

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they were the great traders of the ancient world.  
So Tyre was the mother of these trade routes  
that crisscrossed the Mediterranean.  
And the Phoenicians were not conquerors.  
So a lot of the time when we think about  
the civilizations and empires of antiquity,  
we think, yeah, of empires, of conquest,  
of warring civilizations.  
The Phoenicians were traders and colonizers.  
And they were master mariners.  
They built these phenomenally fast ships out of Cedarwood  
that they harvested from Mount Lebanon.  
And they built the navies of ancient Egypt  
and other civilizations as well.  
But for themselves, they traded  
and they sailed right across the Mediterranean  
and beyond, beyond the Rock of Gibraltar,  
pillars of Hercules, out into the Atlantic.  
And they established colonies in so many places  
across the Mediterranean.  
You'd be surprised, you know, many Mediterranean cities,  
you may have visited.  
They may well have Phoenician routes  
that just as sort of, you know, Malaga has Phoenician routes.  
There are cities which were founded by the Phoenicians  
in Sicily, in Sardinia, in France,  
all are and most famously, of course,  
in North Africa and in Spain, Carthage and Cadiz.  
So yeah, they were known as the great traders  
of the ancient world.  
The other thing they were known for  
is the owners of the color purple.  
Yes, indeed, indeed.  
The Tyrians harvested this purple dye  
from these sea snails known as the murex.  
It was an incredibly valuable commodity.  
And as we know, purple is now the imperial color.  
That originally came from Tyre, that dye.  
And Tyre and purple was one of their major industries  
and like their signature product down the generations.  
One of the most striking sarcophagi in Tyre today  
is this beautifully well-preserved sarcophagus  
from the Byzantine period.  
And it's decorated with fish scales

and what sort of looks like a Medusa head  
and the epitaph on it is anti-pater the murex fisherman.  
And this is not a poor man  
and this is from the Byzantine period.  
So clearly, you know, he's a sort of murex tycoon  
and that's existing till the Byzantine period.  
Can you imagine what an ancient sailor would have seen  
sailing into the harbor of Tyre  
some 3000 years ago, Catherine?  
Well, I think he'd have had his socks knocked off.  
One of the main legacies of Tyre in literature  
and it is a much mythologized, much written about place  
is the beauty of this city.  
And, you know, from Egyptian, you know,  
from the Anastasi papyrus to later sources,  
they describe Tyre as a city in the sea  
with these white stone walls  
that rise directly out of the waves.  
So it's clearly an island which they've built these sort of,  
I mean, I imagine a little bit, like I hope,  
I imagine it looked a little bit like Carcassonne  
in Southwest France, actually,  
the sort of perfectly round, beautiful city  
with these monumental walls.  
But rising out of the sea, not on land.  
So I think it would have been incredible to behold.  
And I think also just highly sophisticated  
to the eyes of an ancient sailor  
because it was one of the great trading ports,  
the great harbors of antiquity.  
So I think that would have just been a lot to admire.  
It began its life as an island city,  
a kind of a citadel just directly off the coast.  
You mentioned there it was connected to the mainland.  
Tell me how Alexander the Great was the key figure here  
in connecting Tyre to the mainland.  
I mean, Alexander, his reputation certainly preceded him  
when he arrived in Tyre and it's lived on till now.  
So I don't need to introduce him too much,  
but suffice to say he's a guy  
who didn't really like to take no for an answer.  
And he was leading this monumental conquest  
from Macedonia across Europe and the Middle East  
and he's eventually gonna get as far as India.



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And as he's sort of doing battle with the Persians,  
he sweeps down the Levantine coast  
and he takes with very little resistance  
all the coastal cities, all the Phoenician cities.  
They all submit to him.  
But Tyre is sort of a fly in the ointment, if you like,  
because it's a much more logistically challenging city  
to capture.  
Why is this?  
It's on an island and it has these monumental walls  
and this amazing navy.  
And Alexander at this point  
does not have a massive navy assembled.  
And he's got an amazing land army,  
which is a dab hand at siege warfare.  
But how is he going to surround a city  
and cut it off from trade supplies  
when firstly it's the great trading power of the age  
and also, you know, his guys can't get there.  
You know, there's this water to cross.  
So, you know, the Tyrians don't really want to go to war  
with Alexander the Great either, they're sensible people.  
So they try and sort of, you know, flatter him.  
They send him a crown of gold.  
They make all these positive noises,  
like let's work together, let's cooperate,  
like we're on your side.  
And Alexander says, sure, but I wanna come and make a,  
I wanna come and make a sacrifice  
at the temple of Heracles-Milkart.  
And this is a very loaded request  
because only the kings of Tyre  
make sacrifices in this temple.  
And it's a very famous temple, you know,  
Herodotus famously traveled to Tyre explicitly  
just to, you know, to see this temple  
because it was, you know, the word of its beauty had traveled.  
So it's a big deal.  
And the Tyrians say to Alexander, no, sorry,  
temple's not available for sacrifice right now,  
but we'd love it if you made a sacrifice.  
Why don't you do it in this other lovely temple  
in the mainland, but that's not gonna cut  
the mustard with Alexander.

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And so he decides, right, you know,  
shots fired, insults given, resistance detected,  
I've gotta take this place.  
And eventually the strategy he takes,  
he commands his army to pull down  
another settlement on the coast.  
So put to, you know, destroy the buildings  
and use the stones from those buildings  
to fill in the sea between the mainland and the island.  
It's about half a mile stretch of sea.  
And he says, we're gonna connect it to the mainland.  
We're gonna make a land bridge, a mole.  
So they're constructing this,  
but aren't they coming under like incredible  
arrow fire and ballistic missiles  
being launched from the walls of Tyre?  
Is they're trying to build this land bridge?  
Well, at first no, because in the first steps,  
first stages of it, they're a bit too far  
for the arrow fire, right?  
And the sea is quite shallow.  
So I think when it starts, they're like, right,  
we thought this was crazy,  
but actually it seems to be working.  
But yes, you're completely right.  
As the bridge extends and they get closer and closer  
to the fortified city with the soldiers inside it.  
They are coming under sort of heavy arrow fire,  
missile fire, the Tyrians send fire ships.  
They put up a very fierce resistance.  
Alexander has to build a palisade wall along the mole.  
He builds siege towers to protect them.  
But the Tyrians burn this all down.  
They send old sort of horse transport ships  
loaded with burning oil and stuff to crash into.  
So it's big drama.  
This is probably one of the most visually striking  
and bizarre sieges of antiquity.  
But against the odds,  
Alexander does succeed in completing this bridge.  
And he also calls up some naval support  
from recently conquered areas.  
And he does succeed in taking Tyre eventually.  
And the mole never is destroyed.

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You know, it's added to, it silts up,  
you know, and it permanently connects Tyres  
to the mainland, which does fundamentally  
mark change in its identity and its independence.  
So when people walk to that outpost,  
they're walking across stones  
laid by the army of Alexander the Great.  
That's extraordinary.  
Tyre, it seems, was absorbed into so many other great empires  
by force or by coercion or by whatever means.  
But during this period, did it manage to keep something  
of its distinctive character and its independence  
under these great powers it lived under?  
So it's certainly dead.  
And I think, you know, the way I would look at it  
is in these two points of continuity  
that we've already touched on.  
One is the worship of Melkart,  
which I'll come back to in a second,  
the mythical founder of the city.  
And also in the purple trade,  
that's another great example,  
because this is something that is distinctly Tyrian.  
And trade in purple, despite multiple conquests  
by the Babylonians, by the Assyrians,  
by the Macedonians, by the Romans,  
this trade continues, and this is a mark of identity.  
But, you know, that's just good economic sense.  
Of course, everyone wants to keep trading  
this valuable commodity.  
But also their reputation for seafaring continues.  
So, you know, part of the reason Alexander wants  
to capture Tyre is that it's still famed  
as this naval hub and hub of trade.  
And he wants that on his side.  
He doesn't want that to be able to back up the Persians  
and so on and so forth.  
But the main mark of continuity,  
even through to the Roman period, I would say,  
is worship of Heracles Melkart.  
And obviously Heracles is a figure, Hercules Heracles  
is a figure in the Greek and Roman pantheon as well.  
He's a demigod.  
But the worship of this figure in Tyre

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is very much conflated with the ancient Phoenician gods, Melkart, who founded Tyre.

And the depictions of Heracles Melkart aren't the Heracles of Greek mythology with a lion's skin and a big club.

They are the Phoenician god Melkart.

This sort of major deity more often.

And he's more often depicted clad in like a loincloth Phoenician costume or whatever than he is in the traditional trappings of Heracles.

And this is the sense that the cult of Melkart and religion was so strong in Tyre that it couldn't just be written off.

And, you know, even into the Roman period, it's truly bizarre.

They've recently discovered a new temple in Tyre.

And what's really bizarre about it is it's built in the Canaanite, the Phoenician style.

This is not built in the shape and traditional layout of a Roman temple.

It's a temple that the Romans was built under Roman rule, but in the traditional Phoenician style.

So the fact that this is continuing down does show that Tyre is retaining certainly strong parts of its identity.

As you said, the Phoenicians of Tyre went around and created these daughter cities around the Mediterranean and of course the most important one of them was the city of Carthage.

And that's the second city you've written about and you visited as well.

And it's now in modern day Tunisia in North Africa.

There's a foundation story around the city of Carthage that goes back to the Aeneid, the Roman classic by Virgil where it tells the story of the founder, the woman Dido, who was forced to flee her home in Tyre after her rich husband was murdered by her brother.

And it relates how she escaped to North Africa where she found Carthage.

Then Aeneas shows up and the gods contrived to make them lovers by forcing them to shelter from a thunderstorm in a cave.

But then tragically Aeneas is reminded that he's got to go off and go off to found the city of Rome.

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And in the legend, he dumps Dido  
and she kills herself in despair.  
Now that's one version.  
That's the version most people would be familiar with  
if they're familiar with this story of Dido and Aeneas at all.  
But you found that the older version of this story,  
there's another version of this story,  
an older one that's richer and more fun.  
How does this older version work, Catherine?  
Yeah, so it follows the same original trajectory.  
Dido is a, I mean, she's known as Alyssa,  
which is her Phoenician name.  
I might, I'm going to move between the two.  
When I say Alyssa, I mean Dido, Dido, Alyssa, la, la, la.  
Dido Alyssa is a Phoenician princess who, as you say,  
husband's killed by her brother and she, they were twins.  
Actually, she and her brother were twins.  
And I think her brother became jealous  
of the wealth of Dido's husband.  
And Dido's husband was the high priest of Melkart.  
And he, so he was a very prominent figure in the city.  
And I think the brother felt threatened by this  
and he wants his wealth.  
So he kills him to get the gold, but he's hidden the gold.  
And the ghost visits Dido and says,  
babe, you're not safe.  
You've got to go.  
He wants the gold.  
I'll tell you where it is.  
So Alyssa, Dido goes and gets the gold.  
She does, there's some subterfuge.  
She tricks her brother into thinking  
she's throwing the gold in the sea.  
So he stops to look for it.  
But really she sails off with the gold, escapes,  
picks up some women, maybe by force,  
maybe not in Cyprus to come with her and her male entourage.  
And they set out to found a new city  
and they come to Carthage.  
And they try to, they come to the coast of North Africa.  
It's not quite called Carthage.  
Carthage is just a Phoenician for Carthadas,  
which means new city.  
So they're there to found a new city.

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And they sort of negotiate with the local chiefs,  
lords, landowners, rulers of this area of land in North Africa.  
And they sort of sneer at them and say,  
well, you can have whatever land you can cover  
with this oxide and he gives her an oxide thinking,  
ha ha, you'll get three square meters max.  
But what Dido does in the myth is she sits down  
and she shreds the oxide into a long ribbon.  
And she lays this ribbon around the base of Bursa Hill.  
And they're so sort of wowed by her trickery,  
sort of Penelope-esque sort of cleverness,  
subterfuge that they say, oh, go on then, have the hill.  
So she found her new empire on Bursa Hill.  
And on the top of it is built the religious center,  
you know, the temples to the Phoenician gods.  
It's all going very well.  
Aeneas never shows up in this version of the myth.  
I mean, that's the traditionally held.  
But then in the Roman, the Latin version peddled by Virgil,  
Aeneas then rocks up and as you say, they fall in love.  
And she becomes completely, you know,  
she lays her kingdom at his feet.  
She says, I'll do anything.  
If you stay with me, you will be the king of Carthage.  
You will have everything I've built.  
La la la really prostrates herself before him  
and begs him to stay.  
Aeneas is, of all the Greek heroes,  
he's a warrior, not a warrior, I would say.  
And he's spending all his time being anxious  
about his fate and his destiny.  
And he's also a pretty reprehensible character,  
you know, leaving his wife to burn in Troy.  
He's a cad.  
He's a cad.  
Yeah, let's call the spade a spade.  
Anyway, I mean, he's a slippery fish, is Aeneas.  
And then he, you know, as you say,  
he goes off to found Romney Leibstider  
and she kills herself.  
This is, as you say, the more popular version.  
But in the other version, this doesn't happen.  
Aeneas doesn't even show up.  
The timelines don't match.

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And Diado, instead, just rules as an independent queen,  
honouring her dead husband's memory,  
the husband that was killed back in Tyre.  
She doesn't want to marry again.  
And eventually, she comes under pressure  
by sort of, you know, her council,  
who say, you know, we need you to marry again,  
so another local lord to sort of solidify an alliance  
and do something for Carthage.  
And she says, no, I don't want to.  
I want to honour my husband's memory  
and I want to rule single.  
And they say, well, no, we're not having that.  
That's hugely selfish.  
You know, you've got to do this for your city.  
So she says, fine, fine, but I'm going to make  
some sacrifices to my husband's memory first.  
And they're like, yes, yes, whatever,  
get on with it, get on with it.  
And she builds this great pyre  
and she starts, she's burning the animal sacrifices.  
And then she throws herself into the flames.  
So the story... Wow, wow, that's pretty wild.  
Yeah.  
Well, it's still in Diado's, you know,  
self-immolation has a long and very current history  
in Tunisia.  
The story of Diado always ends in self-immolation.  
But whether, you know, in one version,  
she's sort of a love slave, you know, who just, you know,  
it's quite, it's human and she's a sympathetic character,  
but it's ultimately quite pathetic.  
You know, she's not an empowered figure.  
Whereas in the other version of the myth,  
she is empowered, you know, she kills herself  
to avoid being, to avoid losing her independence.  
So it's still not a great ending for her,  
but it's the vibes are very different.  
And in Tunisia, this myth is more popular than Virgil's,  
because Virgil's is Roman propaganda, you know.  
The history of Carthage is the most famous case  
of history being written by the winners.  
And Virgil wanted to create this narrative  
that sets Roman Carthage up as, you know,

eternal adversaries.

And in Virgil's version, when Diado dies,  
she curses Roman, she says, we'll forever be enemies.  
And, you know, so this is all part of the Roman agenda  
of pitching Roman Carthage against each other  
as these historic rivals.

So it's not, yeah, it's not quite a trustworthy narrative.

This is Conversations with Richard Fiedler.

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If you were to go to Carthage today,  
when one does go to Carthage today, what do you see?

Is there anything left of the city  
that was famously ruined by the Romans, Catherine?

Yes, there's quite a lot, actually,  
but not as much Punic Carthaginian ruins as you'd like.

So I think what a lot of people don't realise  
when they just think broadly about Carthage  
is that the city sort of had three major lifespans  
separated by periods of being deserted.

But so I think a lot of people think  
that when Rome destroyed Carthage,  
which they did resoundingly, the city didn't come back,  
but actually less than a century later,  
a Roman colony is founded in Carthage,  
and it prospers, and then it also becomes  
an important centre of early Christianity.

So we have buildings from the Roman period,  
loads of them, actually.

We have some very impressive Roman baths,  
the Baths of Antoninus.

There's lots of Roman ruins,  
from later periods of Christian basilicas and such.

But there are still some Punic ruins  
because when the...

And Punic is just sort of...

It's this word that means Carthaginian, essentially,  
and the Punic culture has a lot in common  
with Phoenician culture,  
because the Phoenicians founded Carthage.

There are some Punic remains.

The most famous is the Toffett of Carthage,  
but also because Rome was so thorough in their destruction,  
in a way, it meant that some of the ruins



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were preserved, so they buried a lot of stuff,  
and that means when it's been excavated,  
we can still...

There are still some walls of the original  
Punic settlement standing,  
but no, the temples were all burned,  
and there's materials used to make Roman ones and such, so...

There were three famous Punic wars.  
The first one was a fight that went over  
20 years for control of Sicily,  
which sort of sat between the two empires,  
such as they were between Italy and North Africa,  
and Rome won that after 23 years.

Then there was the Second War, which is the really famous one,  
which was led by, on the Carthaginian side,  
by Hannibal, the great general,  
who famously brought his army up from his colony in Spain,  
up over the Alps, with war elephants over the Alps,  
into Italy, which gave the Romans the shock of their lives.

Just give me a sense of how the Romans  
reacted to this existential threat.

Oh, Carthago de Lenda est.

I mean, they reacted extremely,  
they were sort of right to do so,  
because I don't think anyone's come as...

I mean, until the actual sackings of Rome by Goths and such later,  
no one at that point had come so close to really,  
as you say, threatening the very existence of Rome  
and threatening the destruction of Rome,  
and historians often look back and say that Hannibal could.

His great mistake was not marching on Rome  
and destroying it when he had the chance.

So how did they deal with it?

I mean, what's a modern comparison?

In some ways, it's the Treaty of Versailles.

It's a sense of this very...

They decide they really want to take down,  
once they've been successful militarily,  
they don't want to sort of make a fair truce  
with Carthage that will ever allow it to rise again.

They want to humble it so much  
that Carthage will never again threaten Rome.

And so actually they, you know,  
and the Cato famously ends all his speeches with, you know,

Carthage must be destroyed, Carthage must be destroyed.  
Yes, he does that in every speech in the Senate, doesn't he?  
Every speech he makes to the Senate, he says this and that  
about things, and by the way, at the end,  
Carthage must be destroyed. That's just a matter of course.  
Yes, and it's a top billing on his agenda.  
I mean, you know, he gets his wish.  
And, you know, and Cato visits Carthage  
in between the wars as part of a sort of delegation,  
and he's really alarmed that the city has recovered,  
because, you know, they're ordered to pay reparations  
and tribute and dismantle their navy.  
They're all these sort of, like, you know,  
conditions to their surrender.  
And then Cato visits and sees  
that actually the city seems to be recovering,  
and he sees sort of a hive of activity,  
and happy people prospering.  
And this really rankles him.  
He thinks this is too dangerous.  
We can't have this, and this is partly what motivates him  
to campaign so strongly for Carthage to be destroyed.  
And eventually, these terms are offered to Carthage,  
which are just unacceptable on any level to the Carthaginians.  
They say, yes, we won't kill you all,  
and you can maintain your sort of, you know,  
Carthage can still exist, but you have to move.  
So, you know, as we've talked about,  
the idea of cities are so important in the ancient world.  
They're historic centres, they're religious centres,  
they're political centres, they're centres of ideas.  
And the visual impact of the cities  
on the identity of the civilisations is so important.  
So, you know, the Temple of Eshmun in Carthage  
is so important to Carthaginian cultural identity.  
And the Romans say, yeah, you've got to take your city down,  
you've got to destroy Carthage,  
and you have to move further inland.  
This is like in terms of Genghis Khan,  
this is like you have to all get out  
and let us do what we will with your city.  
Yes, and well, just more that your city can still exist,  
but not where it is now, not with these buildings,  
not with these stones.

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And so then this is great for your question of what is a city,  
is it the people or the stones?  
Well, for the Carthaginians, the stones are pretty damn important,  
and they're told to get out.  
And they eventually decide, no, we can't do this,  
we're going to stay and fight.  
This leads to this monumental sacking of Carthage,  
where the Romans do come,  
and, you know, the stories of the Carthaginians  
preparing for the final conquest,  
because they have been forced to dissolve their armies,  
dismantle their fleets, hand in their weapons.  
And now it's like, right, no, we're not doing this,  
we can't cooperate anymore, they're asking too much of us.  
It's tantamount to destruction anyway.  
We're going to make a last stand,  
we're going to have a final battle.  
And there's, you know, there's these stories of women  
cutting their hair to make rope  
of even the holy places being turned into factories  
to create weapons.  
Everyone, men, women, children, elderly,  
everyone is pitching in  
in this amazing war effort  
to arm the men of Carthage to repel Rome.  
And of course they're not successful.  
They've been hobbled by harrowing defeats.  
So Rome descends on, and they say,  
we're not giving in anymore, this is it.  
We're not going to stand by and have our culture annihilated.  
We're going to go down fighting.  
And then there is this, this thorough sacking of the city  
that ends with its total destruction.  
And even once the battle is won,  
they burn the entire city to the ground.  
And then once the fires have raged for days,  
killing squads are sent out among the burning ruins  
to just to slaughter anyone who's left in hiding.  
And it's really the breaking of a civilization.  
It's a genocide on a major scale.  
And then the libraries are burned  
and the books that, you know, some books are given away to,  
but many are burned.  
And yeah, it's a complete destruction of a culture and a people.

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Yeah, it's one of the great crimes of the ancient world of which there are many such great crimes. But you write it also about how, eventually, it recovered under Roman rule, particularly under the patronage of Julius Caesar. And it was conquered in the fifth century by the much maligned vandals. And then taken by the Byzantine general Belisarius, then sacked again in the Arab conquest of North Africa in the seventh century. So it's remained an Arab and Berber city to this day. But is there any pride in the Carthaginian past in what is left of Carthage in Tunis today? There is. But I'd say it's quite vague and it's quite distant because in Lebanon, you will find that a large portion of the population identify very strongly with the Phoenician heritage and believe themselves to be Phoenicians and the direct descendants of the Phoenicians. And this is very important to the culture. And it's also been sort of appropriated politically in this sort of thing. In Carthage, this is less the case. People know the story of Alyssa. They know that Hannibal was important. Hannibal and Alyssa were on Tunisian banknotes for a long time. So these are important historic figures. But people don't identify as Carthaginian. People, for the most part, Tunisians today identify much more closely with Berber and Arab heritage, much more recent historical figures. Carthage just seemed very distant to them. And it's no small part because Carthage really did cease to exist at some point. Carthage now is the name of a suburb of the capital of Tunis, which, yes, does occupy the land that historic Carthage once occupied. But this Carthage is an anomaly in that it hasn't remained a city with this name. Carthage is, as I say now, it's a suburb of Tunis and Tunis is the Arab city. And the stones of Carthage were used to build, you know, the mosques and the streets and the bathhouses of Tunis.

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But it hasn't continued ideologically in the same way.  
And that is in large part due to the multiple sackings.  
But if you dial it back again to that moment in the year 216 BC,  
when the armies of Hannibal are rampaging  
across the Italian countryside,  
the Romans are cowering in terror in their cities,  
you make the point that he made the mistake.  
Most historians say this, that Hannibal made the mistake  
of never trying to attack Rome directly.  
And do you ever wonder what would have happened  
if Hannibal had woken up one day in his tent in the year 216,  
somewhere in the Italian countryside and said,  
you know what, today we're just going to march on Rome.  
You know what, today we're just going to take Rome.  
Just the consequences of that decision  
would mean we live in a completely and totally different world now, wouldn't it?  
It really would.  
And I have no idea what it would look like.  
I mean, one of the main things that Rome handed down to us today  
was the spread of Christianity.  
Rome would later adopt the Christian religion  
and that's an ideological shift that we carry today.  
Would Christianity have succeeded  
in a Mediterranean rule by Carthage?  
I don't know.  
So these are all these questions that would have happened.  
I mean, and would Carthage have been able to sustain that conquest?  
Would Carthage have risen to become the equivalent of the Roman Empire?  
It's speculation, but it would have been an incredibly different world.  
I've got time for just one more of your fabulous cities  
and that's Syracuse, where we started at the beginning.  
Syracuse, the ancient city on the east coast of Sicily.  
Now, the Punic Wars that we were talking about then  
had started for as a contest for the prize of Sicily  
and it's a great city of Syracuse.  
How important was Syracuse as a city in its heyday  
when it was a Greek city before the Romans came barging in?  
Here are these bastard Romans yet again barging in,  
but tell me how important it was before that happened, Catherine.  
I mean, it was a very important city,  
but it would never have had the scale of Rome  
and there was never quite a Syracusean empire,  
but the tyrants of Syracuse won.  
Agathocles did march on North Africa

and he did conquer bits of Calabria  
but it didn't have the reach, if you like, militaristically  
in terms of conquest of other great cities of antiquity,  
but it was described as the fairest Greek city by Cicero  
and it was very uniquely situated.

Syracuse is at the very centre of the Mediterranean geographically  
so it has this very particular location  
which has informed its identity and its importance.

But I think what I argue is that Syracuse is more important  
as a place of ideas than necessarily as a political stronghold  
and so forth.

Syracuse is the birthplace of Archimedes  
who attempts valiantly to defend Syracuse against the Romans  
and this is beautifully depicted in the new Indiana Jones film.  
Tell me about some of the machines he created  
to defend Syracuse against the Roman invaders coming in by sea.  
This is disentangling history and myth, it's very hard to say,  
but it's super fun and I hope it's all true.

In theory, he created this amazing heat ray  
which focused the sunlight through lenses and mirrors  
to burn ships out of the sea  
to sort of send fire laser jets to concentrated sunlight.  
Yeah, like kids using a magnifying glass on an ant or something.  
To burn ants, yeah, exactly like that.

But he did this with ships, he did this with whole ships according to the story.  
Staled up and my favourite one is actually the claw.

I mean he had this, you know, causing to hit, you know, the chronicles.  
He had this device which was sort of like a, yeah, like, you know,  
those arcade games where you can use like a metal claw  
to pick up a fluffy animal and it drops down the shoe  
and you get to keep the animal.

He built like a claw like this for ripping ships out of the water,  
like a sort of iron grappling hook that could latch on to the prows of ships  
and like hoick them from the water and then smash them and drop them down again.

Well see, Catherine, I have to ask you, you know,  
because I think actually all historians are secret and furtive time travellers in their minds.  
What would you give to watch that spectacle from the harbour of Syracuse,  
however many thousand, what, 2,000 years ago or so,  
or a bit more than that when it happened?

Wouldn't that be amazing to witness such a thing?

It really would and that's what Indiana Jones brought us this year.

They, you know, they, they, they transport Indy back to the siege of Syracuse  
and, you know, I would have loved to have seen that.

I'd have been terrified, I'd have been really terrified.

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I'm, you know, I'm not sure I could have spoken ancient Greek with Archimedes to negotiate mercy as quite as well as, quite as well as Phoebe Wallabridge and Harrison Ford. So I think I'd have, but yeah, it would have been, it would have been phenomenal and I'd love to know the truth of Archimedes inventions and if, if the heat ray did exist, yeah, I'd love to see that. It would have been amazingly cool but a bit hard on the old Romans but maybe they deserved it. You describe this as perhaps your favourite of all these cities. Is it your favourite of all these cities? Are you allowed to have favourites? Are you, are you admitting this shyly if it is indeed true, Catherine? I have different relationships with each of them. I mean, Tyre is the one I've spent the most time in. Syracuse is the nicest place to visit as a tourist, I have to say. It's just beautiful and the food is fantastic and it's easy. Although it is becoming monstrously hot. But my favourite is, with a very heavy heart, is Antioch, is Antakia. And because Antakia was recently destroyed in the earthquakes of February this year, which is incredibly sobering and I was caught in one of the earthquakes. Yeah, can you tell the story of that please, of how that happened? I've been living in Beirut for a while and I woke up one night with my shower rail falling down and my German shepherd going crazy barking and I didn't really understand what had happened but you knew something had happened, something in the night. And then you sort of wake up to news reports the next day and you see that there's been this colossal earthquake across southern Turkey and northern Syria. And at first I didn't hear any reports of Antakia. So I thought, okay, Antakia doesn't seem to be the epicentre. Maybe Antakia hasn't been too badly affected. And then what dawned on me in the days that followed was that actually Antakia had been probably the worst affected city of them all. And the reason there had been no reports is that communications are completely down, aid wasn't getting there and so reports weren't coming out. And then as people gradually realized what had happened in Antakia then the report has descended. And I waited. My book was going to press that month. Actually, Twilight Cities was due to go to press in February. And I had to say, no, don't print it because everything's wrong now.

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I'd spent a lot of time in Antakia interviewing local people,  
writing descriptions of the modern city  
and what heritage stands.  
I was like, none of this is true anymore.  
So then two weeks after the earthquake,  
I booked to go to get some closure on it myself  
but also to see what monuments were standing and what weren't.  
And then yes, when I was there,  
I thought going two weeks later,  
the aftershocks will mostly be over and the rescue efforts.  
I don't want to be getting in the way of rescue efforts.  
And so two weeks later, that seems like the right time to go.  
But it wasn't because two weeks later,  
another magnitude 6.4 or something earthquake struck right as I was there.  
It was the most frightening experience of my life.  
And yeah, I've never experienced anything like that  
and I hope I never do again.  
Where were you when it struck, Catherine?  
I was in Antakia.  
I was driving back to Antakia from Samandag,  
the St. Simeon's on the coast.  
And we were just fuelling up just outside the city  
and the petrol station I was in collapsed  
and we sort of drove out of it as the roof was coming down.  
It was awful.  
And what was really bizarre as a historian was Antakia  
because it is sort of situated on this three tectonic plate boundary,  
Antakia has been destroyed again and again by earthquakes over the years  
and there was this really dark sentence I'd written in my book  
which was it's only a matter of time before another earthquake strikes this region.  
I had no comprehension that it was going to happen then  
and also throughout history we have these descriptions of earthquakes survivors  
writing about the trauma, the destruction of Antioch again and again  
and these awful earthquakes, you know, we've got Roman emperors scurrying out of windows  
to get away from it, that sort of thing.  
And the descriptions are the same, you know,  
and you suddenly have this connection with these people of the past,  
this sense of roaring of thunder coming from the earth,  
from like the sound of thunder but coming from underneath you  
and this lurching and this and it's all  
and these chronicles descriptions of these earthquakes in this place,  
they're remarkably similar all the way down to the modern reporting we've had recently.  
So yeah, with a heavy heart and Takia and Antioch is probably my favourite city  
because I think, you know, following all of that,



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I just have the strongest emotional connection to that city.

You know, people I interviewed died in the earthquake, lost family members and you're sort of seeing history, you're seeing history repeating itself.

So it's a very bizarre and uncanny connection.

It appears repeatedly in the Bible, it's a city founded by one of Alexander the Great's generals.

Yes, Saluka's Nikita.

Yes, in about 300 BC.

It was a famous and important city in the Roman Empire.

Tell me the role Antioch had, and Takia as it is today, Antioch had, in the fostering of Christianity in its earliest years.

A really interesting role actually, it's actually, according to the Bible, it's the place where Christians first identified themselves by that term as Christians.

And it had a sort of a secretive community of practicing Christians during the Roman Empire.

It was a harbour, you know, St Paul preached there and spent time there, as did St Peter.

And there were lots of sort of theological debates that took place there.

But it was a gathering point for early Christians and it was where,

it was a place where the religion was, you know, first preached, you know, the Roman pagans and it got a lot of traction.

And in the days of early Christianity, the Christians would meet to worship and to talk in caves around the city because obviously they were persecuted within the Roman metropolis.

And some of these caves you can still visit today.

And, you know, one of the most famous ones is this.

It's known as the Cave Church of St Peter.

Okay, it's unlikely, you know, that that provenance is unclear

because if we look at medieval texts from the Crusaders, they don't make a big song and dance about this, which they would do if it was held to be the place where St Peter preached at that time.

And then in later sources, it's called the Cave Church of St John.

But if you visit this cave in the hills outside Antioch, which I did, you can see that there's Byzantine flooring there.

You can see that this is absolutely a place of Christian worship that goes back centuries and how far exactly it's unclear.

But it's completely plausible that it was a meeting point of the early Christians.

It's very well hidden and it's a big, you know, it's a big roomy cave with this ancient altar.

And it's now, you know, it's a place, it's a UNESCO site now,

but it's also a place of worship they hold, I think they,

I think they hold an Easter Mass there each year now.

And what state was this cave in when you visited after the earthquake?

Well, that was what was so moving because it was very difficult to get into Antiochia because everything was collapsed. You really can't imagine it.

There are no roads because all the buildings collapsed into the roads.

And so the first place that I was able to visit was the Cave Church because it's in the hills outside.

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And miraculously, not miraculously, it survived completely intact.  
Like I went in and it was exactly as it had been.  
It's got this facade on the outside.  
There wasn't even a crack, like all the buildings near are down.  
That facade was in perfect condition.  
And inside the altar is in perfect condition.  
There's a statue of St. Peter, sort of semi-procariously perched on the wall  
and it's not even fallen.  
So it was in perfect condition.  
That was incredibly moving.  
I sort of cried when I went in there because, I mean,  
but that was just the emotion of seeing the rest of the city destroyed.  
But it was in perfect condition.  
And there's something, you know, I spoke to a very, you know,  
eminent historian who's specialized much more than me in the history of Antachia,  
Andrea de Georgie.  
And he said that this cave church is actually built directly into a fault.  
I don't know exactly what that means,  
but it's, you know, the part of the mountain that it's built into  
is sort of directly connected to, I don't know, the mechanisms of earthquakes.  
I don't understand.  
It's for that reason that it survived pretty much perfectly all these centuries.  
So, you know, all the temples built by the Romans and Antioch,  
they were destroyed in earthquakes, various points, you know,  
the geographies changed so many times because of these earthquakes.  
But this cave church has remarkably saved, preserved this whole time.  
Well, God and people would draw religious conclusions from that  
because it's this sanctuary from the vast tectonic forces that are right around it.  
It is.  
And it's hard to, it's hard for me because, you know,  
why one of the most upsetting things was the destruction of the religious buildings in Antachia.  
So it did have this amazing Greek Orthodox church  
that was completely destroyed.  
The synagogue, the synagogue survived actually.  
There was, there's been a Jewish community in, in Antachia continuously.  
The synagogue was preserved, but so, you know, so many mosques were destroyed,  
so many churches were destroyed.  
But yes, this cave church, the oldest site of Christian worship in that region,  
has, has remained completely intact.  
And it is remarkable, it is remarkable.  
It fell under Muslim rule in the 7th century.  
Then it was conquered by Christian crusader knights from Europe.  
It was a crusader state for around 200 years or so.  
And then reconquered after, by the mum looks and on and on it goes

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and pulled down by the mum looks.

And I just wonder if it's a place, is it, is it, you know,

if in a Mexico city is a city that's built on top of the old Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan.

And you can see the foundation stones of that Aztec city

on some of the Spanish buildings that were built on top of it.

Have they done that in a place like Antioch,

which has been pulled down by, by people and by earthquakes again and again.

Has it recycled the stones and bricks again and again and again?

You know, I guess that they do.

I think probably not on the same, you know, looking at the city of Antachia,

I have to say, beautiful as it is, or certainly was, beautiful as it was.

You didn't get the same impressions that you did so clearly in Tunis

and in Tyre that these are the recycled stones of Antiquity.

So it's hard to say to what extent, but it's certainly been built over.

And I think, I think because of the earthquake nature, actually,

it's been abandoned for long periods of time between these disasters.

So I don't think there's this direct recycling and the use of Spolia happening.

But so, but there certainly has been built over.

And this is what's amazing.

You know, they were building this new hotel in Antachia recently

and they discovered this amazing spread of beautifully preserved Roman Rosaics

as they were digging the foundation.

So, you know, beneath Antachia, there are layers and layers of history to be discovered.

But it's, you know, it's, it's, it's hard to do that when there's a modern city built over the top.

But I think I've had to tell this story.

It's the case of in some ways being kept, be careful of what you ask for,

because I think the, the fascination of some of these places,

the mystique of these cities you've visited is that you get that poignant sense of impermanence from them.

They were great and majestic places that poets and historians in the ancient world raved about once and now they are what they are.

And they impart this great sense of the impermanence of great power and fragility.

And I suppose that's the thing you embark upon when you embark upon writing a book like this.

And then, then Antachia really shows you what this means, really up close,

right, while you're right in the middle of the place.

Do you think about that, I wonder?

Yeah, I mean, it's all, this whole book project has been sort of an exercise in Ozymandias.

I mean, looking at the, the collapse of what's great and the transitory nature of, of greatness and of power.

And you see these great empires sort of humbled to dust.

And it's sort of with Tyre, it's so, it's bizarre because as, you know,

we have this Ezekiel prophecy of, you know, Ezekiel likens Tyre to a treasure ship careening towards wreckage.

And he says, oh Tyre, I will cast down thy beauty.

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And, and he, you know, he says in this, this city, which is the epitome of greatness, of grandeur, of splendor and antiquity, he says I was, you know, your walls will be broken down and Tyre will become a place just where fishermen spread their nets over bare rock. And it's, it's bizarre and it's prescient because that is exactly what did happen to Tyre. For over a hundred years, it was only sort of an uninhabited fishing village and the great walls of Tyre were cast down into the waves and they still are. So, yeah, this whole book has been a reflection on that. And the life cycles and then, you know, wondering what will become of, become of our great cities and our civilizations because, you know, the Tyrians never saw this coming, you know, and yeah, it's just the cyclical nature of history and actually that we are, you know, this is just, this is just a moment in history and that our great buildings may one day be ruined. But this is something that bothers me a little bit when I look at modern building techniques. They're not going to make as picturesque ruins as those of antiquity. It's, you know, we don't build like we used to. So it's, it's just going to be a right mess of sort of iron rods and concrete blocks. If people are still around a thousand years from now, which, you know, they walk around amongst the ruins of 21st century civilization and go, Carl, look at the holes these people lived in. Isn't that terrible? Yeah. Yuck. Well, I mean, it's, but it is, it's also modern building techniques. That's just something slightly more chaotic and horrible because, you know, modern buildings, I mean, I saw this in the aftermath of the earthquake and stuff, you know, they don't, it's not solid blocks of marble that break and, you know, whatever. It's, it's dodgy concrete with, with metal rods through it. It's not, it's not, they don't make, modern buildings don't make for pretty ruins. I would, I would say, yeah. Catherine, it's completely fascinating. Thank you so much for taking us on this tour of these lost cities of the Mediterranean. Been such a lovely thing to talk to you. Thank you so much. Thank you for having me. It's been great. You've been listening to a podcast of Conversations with Richard Fidler. For more Conversations interviews, please go to the website, [abc.net.au](http://abc.net.au).