

**The Chalybes from Scythia to Britannia: Interview with Valerio Massimo Manfredi about the novel/movie *The Last Legion*  
by Eleonora Cavallini**

I phoned Valerio Massimo Manfredi at 3 p.m. of Sunday, September 16, 2007, to ask him some questions about the film adaptation (directed by Doug Lefler, 2007) of his novel *The Last Legion* (2002).

**Valerio:** In general, I believe that a film, as a work of art, is independent from the book it is inspired by. Cinema has its own modes of expression, its communicative strategies and, moreover, it often addresses a different target audience from the readers of a literary work. In this case, the production focused on a public of families and children, introducing fantasy elements, and avoiding both bloody and sex scenes. The making of a film always involves huge investments, and experiences in recent years have shown that the fantasy genre always has a strong impact on the public.

**Eleonora:** And yet in the film some important parts of the books are lacking, or greatly condensed - for instance, the epic journey of the protagonists on the run towards Britannia.

**Valerio:** Although they've been shortened, some shots are actually there, for instance the crossing of the Alps and the Channel crossing. But the narration of the journey alone makes up a substantial part of my book (about 50 pages), and could have been taken as the subject for a separate film [this reminds me of Claudio Bondi's *De Reditu Suo*, adapted from Rutilius Namatianus, n.d.r.]. Anyway, I think ten minutes more would have been enough to introduce a couple of essential moments into the film, and therefore give it the appropriate dimension with respect to the story it tells. I can assure you that, at the beginning, there were at least four hours of footage, containing sequences that were, in my opinion, very effective, but which were later cut in the editing stage. For instance, in the full version there is a scene where Romulus Augustus is exhausted and seems about to die, but Aurelius comforts him, and the boy resumes his journey. The editing, however, follows the specific needs of the production and of the investors – for instance, a shorter film can be screened more than once in a day. Regarding the editing, I can disclose a significant detail about *Gladiator*: in order to come to the final cut, a sequence was left out, which featured the most expensive scenery in the film - made not with computer graphics, but with traditional technologies. So, in the final stage of the making, this precious set was left completely unused.

**Eleonora:** The character of Romulus Augustus is certainly more complex and nuanced in the book than it is in the film. However, the interpretation of young actor Thomas Sangster [who already starred as young Hitler in *The rise of evil*, 2003] seems to me very convincing. Who decided to include him in the cast?

**Valerio:** Thomas Sangster was especially supported by Raffaella De Laurentiis. She succeeded in convincing her father Dino, who was initially perplexed about this choice.

**Eleonora:** And what do you think of the radical changes made to the female character? Mira, Zeno's Oriental envoy, seems to me very different from the Livia Prisca of your novel...

**Valerio:** This is the sort of choice that is made by the production on the basis of casting. Since Aishwarya Rai, who is well-known and loved by the public, confirmed her availability for the role, the production thought it appropriate to include her in the cast. This of course entailed a rethinking, and a rewriting, of the character, so Livia Prisca was turned into the exotic, but no less valiant, Mira.

**Eleonora:** Valerio, your novel came out in 2002, and this film, *The Last Legion*, comes five years after the novel. In 2004, in the United States, another film was made, *King Arthur*, directed by Antoine Fuqua, with a screenplay by David Franzoni (who also wrote the screenplay for *Gladiator*). The story told in *King Arthur* is in many respects similar to your story. What do you think of this?

**Valerio:** I cannot say it with certainty, but I have the impression that Franzoni read *The Last Legion* (the English translation was published in 2003), and drew from it many ideas for his screenplay of King Arthur. Many people have told me: “this film closely resembles your book”. Apart from the crucial tale -whose central element is the sword, Excalibur- set between the Rome of the Caesars and the heroic deeds of King Arthur, the two works also share many other features. The handful of untamed knights escorting a boy of royal blood (*King Arthur*’s Alexius overtly evokes Romulus August), the valiant woman warrior in love with the protagonist, the crucial battle, and more. Anyway, suspicions about Franzoni are not unwarranted – everyone sees that, at least in the first part, *Gladiator* is nothing but an undeclared remake of a 1964 film, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* by Anthony Mann.

**Eleonora:** Yes, I know. Incidentally, I have just finished writing a chapter for the new collection of essays edited by Martin M. Winkler, which deals precisely with *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. The book will be published by Blackwell, like the previous volumes, on *Gladiator*, *Troy*, and *Spartacus*. Of course we all noticed the many analogies between *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and *Gladiator*. But coming back to *The Last Legion*, don’t you think the film is sometimes too hasty, don’t you think it takes shortcuts, drawing directly from *King Arthur* instead of following your novel’s storyline?

**Valerio:** Where, for instance?

**Eleonora:** Well, for example, in *King Arthur* Artorius Castus, before the battle on ice, asks Lancelot how many enemies there are. His brother-in-arms informs him that there are more than 300 of them (against two dozens), and Artorius answers: “Fewer than I thought” – which is the exact same answer Aurelius gives Demetrius when the latter informs him that the enemies are more than 1000.

**Valerio:** I think this is just a coincidence, and probably has to do with the fact that the situation is similar. In fact, because *King Arthur* was so badly received both by critics and by the public, despite the production’s considerable efforts and some remarkable aspects, like the beautiful soundtrack by Hans Zimmer, the screenwriters of *The Last Legion* decided to distance themselves radically from Fuqua’s film. *King Arthur*’s most serious mistake is, in my opinion, that it gives the protagonists the same names as the heroes of the Arthurian saga (Arthur, Merlin, Lancelot, Guinevere). The story is set in the late Roman Empire, towards the end of the 5th century, so it’s clear that the spectators, who are accustomed to a very different version of the heroic deeds of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table, feel puzzled and let down. My book (and, therefore, the film it inspired) certainly contains hints at King Arthur’s future endeavors, but these are mediated by Romulus August, heir to the sword of the Caesars, i.e. the legendary Excalibur.

**Eleonora:** Speaking about Excalibur and King Arthur, I would like you to explain something that could be useful also for the spectators who have not read your book. Whether we believe him to be a historical figure or not, King Arthur’s chronology is set in the 5-6th century AD by several sources, such as Nennius (*Historia Brittonum*, 9th century) and the *Annales Cambriae* (10th century). Have you drawn from these sources? Or have you used other documents?

**Valerio:** There is also an earlier source, Bede.

**Eleonora:** What about the final battle described in your book, is it the battle of Badon Hill, the one already evoked by Gildas in the 6th century (*De excidio Britanniae*).

**Valerio:** Yes, the battle I had in mind is precisely that of Mons Badonicus [where, according to the sources, a mixed army of Romans and Britons seriously defeated the Anglo-Saxon invaders, n.d.r.]. But the tradition that attributes the command of the victorious army to King Arthur is rather late - Geoffrey of Monmouth’s unreliable *Historia regum Britanniae* even dates as late as 1130. I rather tend to think that the leader was Aurelianus Ambrosius, as can be inferred from the earliest sources.

**Eleonora:** Aurelianus Ambrosius is indeed the name of the protagonist in your book. But what about Meridius Ambrosinus, Romulus August’s mysterious preceptor?

**Valerio:** It is a Latin calque of Myrdin Emreis, Merlin's ancient Celtic name.

**Eleonora:** Another question. Are there any historical, or pseudo-historical sources that suggest a direct link between Romulus August and King Arthur?

**Valerio:** No, the idea was mine. But this link has an important symbolical meaning, for it is a sort of 'baton passage' between a great power that has come to the end of its history (Rome), and a great nation on the rise (Britain/England).

**Eleonora:** Finally, what can you tell me about Ensis Caliburnus (= "the Chalybes' sword")? It seems plausible to me that the name Excalibur has to be traced to the Chalybes, the mythical blacksmiths from Scythia [already mentioned at v. 715 of Aeschylus' *Prometheus*]. But from a linguistic point of view, I would doubt that "Ex" is derived from "Ensis".

**Valerio:** Whatever the etymology, I think it's clear that the name Excalibur comes from steel, the Chalybes' mythical invention. You see, Eleonora, Ensis Caliburnus actually just means "sword of steel", and, therefore, "Roman sword". Indeed, in the ancient world, steel was a technological achievement of the Roman army, which owed its military superiority to it. The excavation campaigns carried out at Teutoburg have shown that the swords used by Arminius and his soldiers were not Germanic, but Roman, because they were made of steel. Arminius and his people had acquired these weapons when serving as auxiliary troops of the Roman army, and it was thanks to them that they managed to defeat Varus' legions.

**Eleonora:** This is really interesting. Thanks for everything, Valerio.

**Valerio:** Thank you, Eleonora.

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