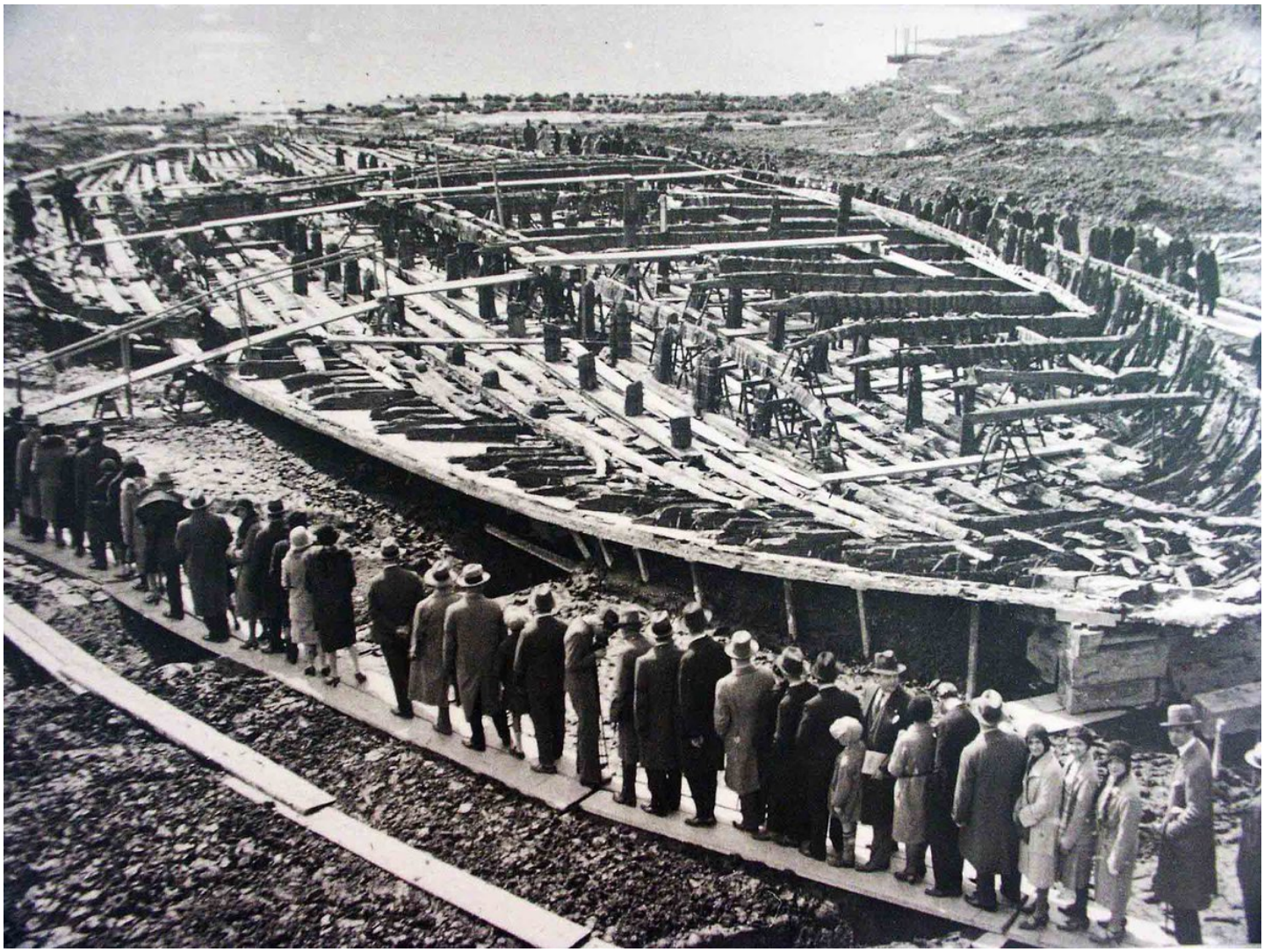
Twitter Thread by Paul ■■ Cooper



Paul ■■ Cooper
@PaulMMCooper

Some of the most remarkable lost artefacts from the ancient world were the titanic wrecks of the Nemi ships.

In their 1st century heyday they held gardens, palaces & baths in a floating wonderland. But barely a decade after their recovery, they were lost forever.



For centuries, the fishermen who sailed in the placid waters of Lake Nemi, 30km south of Rome, knew a secret.

It was said that the rotting timbers of a gigantic ancient wreck lurked below the water's quiet surface.

(■ Kleuske; Google)



But the lake was tiny, with an area only 1.6km².

And with no other body of water connected to it, what would a vessel of that size be doing there?

(■■Lake Nemi, George Inness, 1872)



Still, the stories about the gigantic ship persisted. Fishermen even used grappling hooks to bring up ancient artefacts from the supposed wreck to sell.

In 1446 a young Cardinal & nephew of the Pope, Prospero Colonna, decided to investigate the rumours.



Sailing over the vast wreck, Colonna confirmed that it did indeed exist, a sprawling lattice of wooden beams just visible at a depth of 18.3 meters (60 ft).

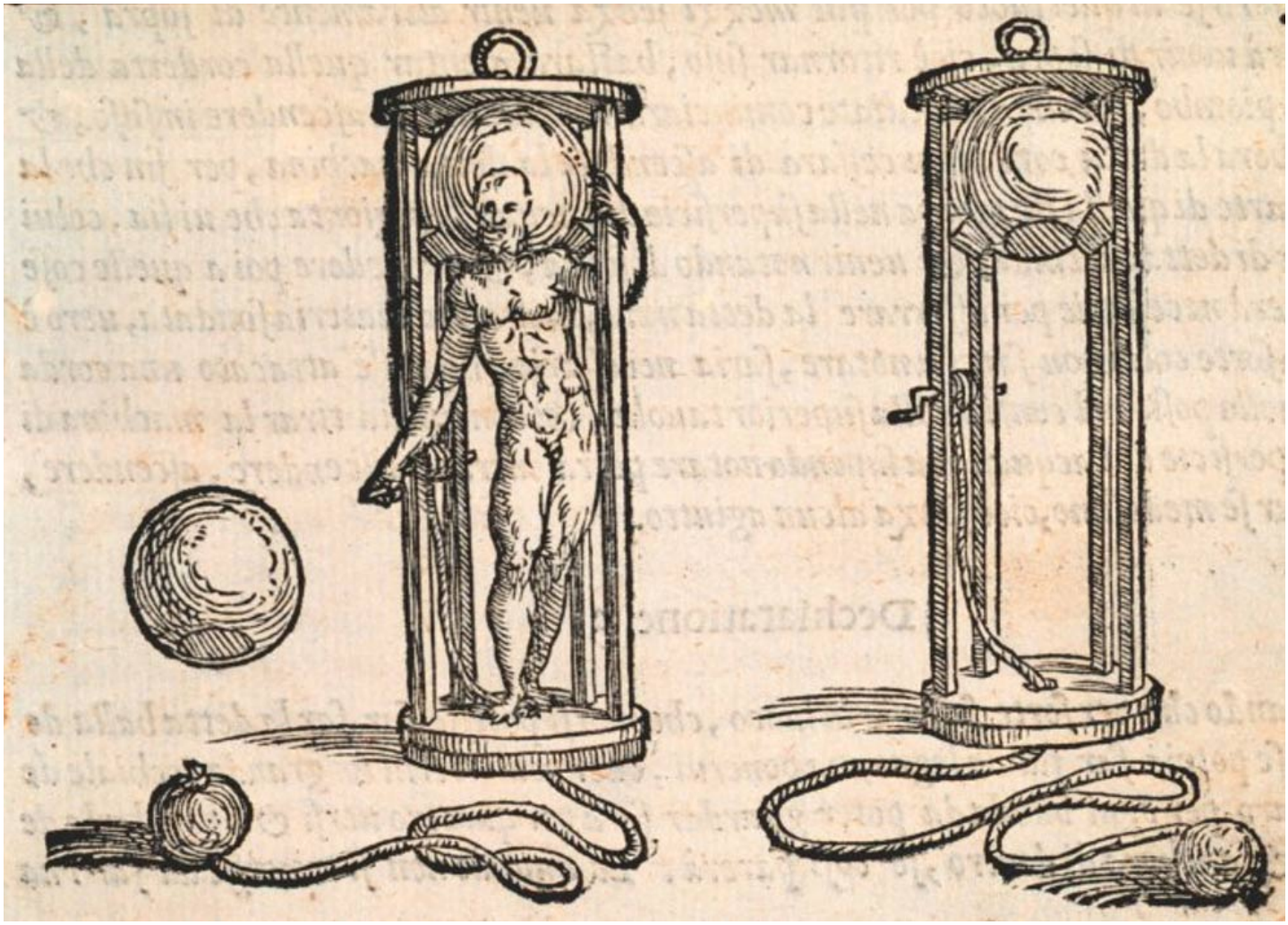
His men tried to tear off planks with hooks, but didn't succeed in bringing up anything else.

(■■Joseph Wright, 1790)



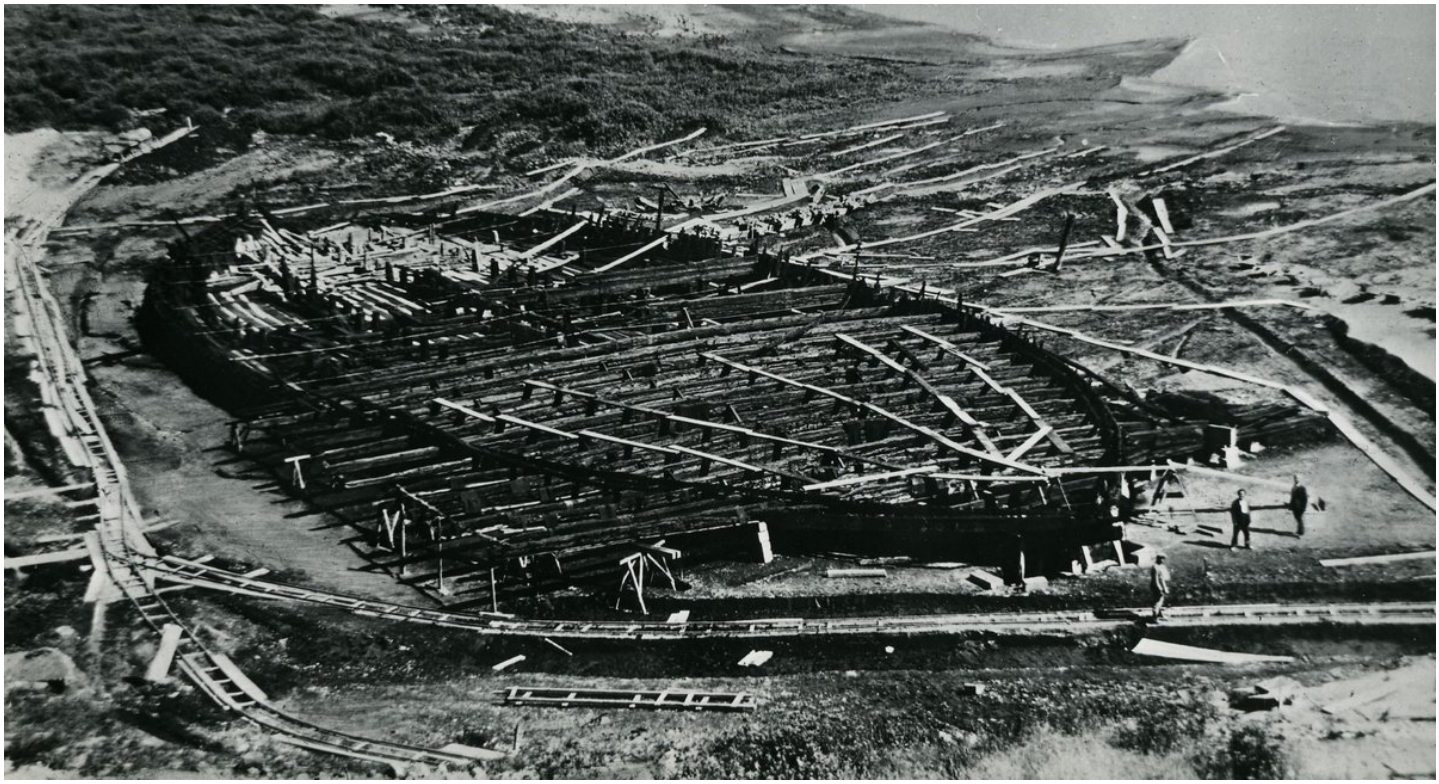
In 1535, Italian inventor Guglielmo de Lorena & his partner Francesco de Marchi returned to the wrecks. They descended in the latest technology: a diving bell.

They saw an enormous superstructure, & brought up artefacts made of marble & bronze scattered on the lake floor.



It wasn't until 1929, under the orders of Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, that what lay beneath was finally exposed.

Mussolini ordered the whole lake to be drained. Engineers reactivated an ancient Roman cistern that together with a pump reduced the water level by 20m.



In the mud, slowly emerging from the waters, the Italian engineers found not one, but two enormous shipwrecks.

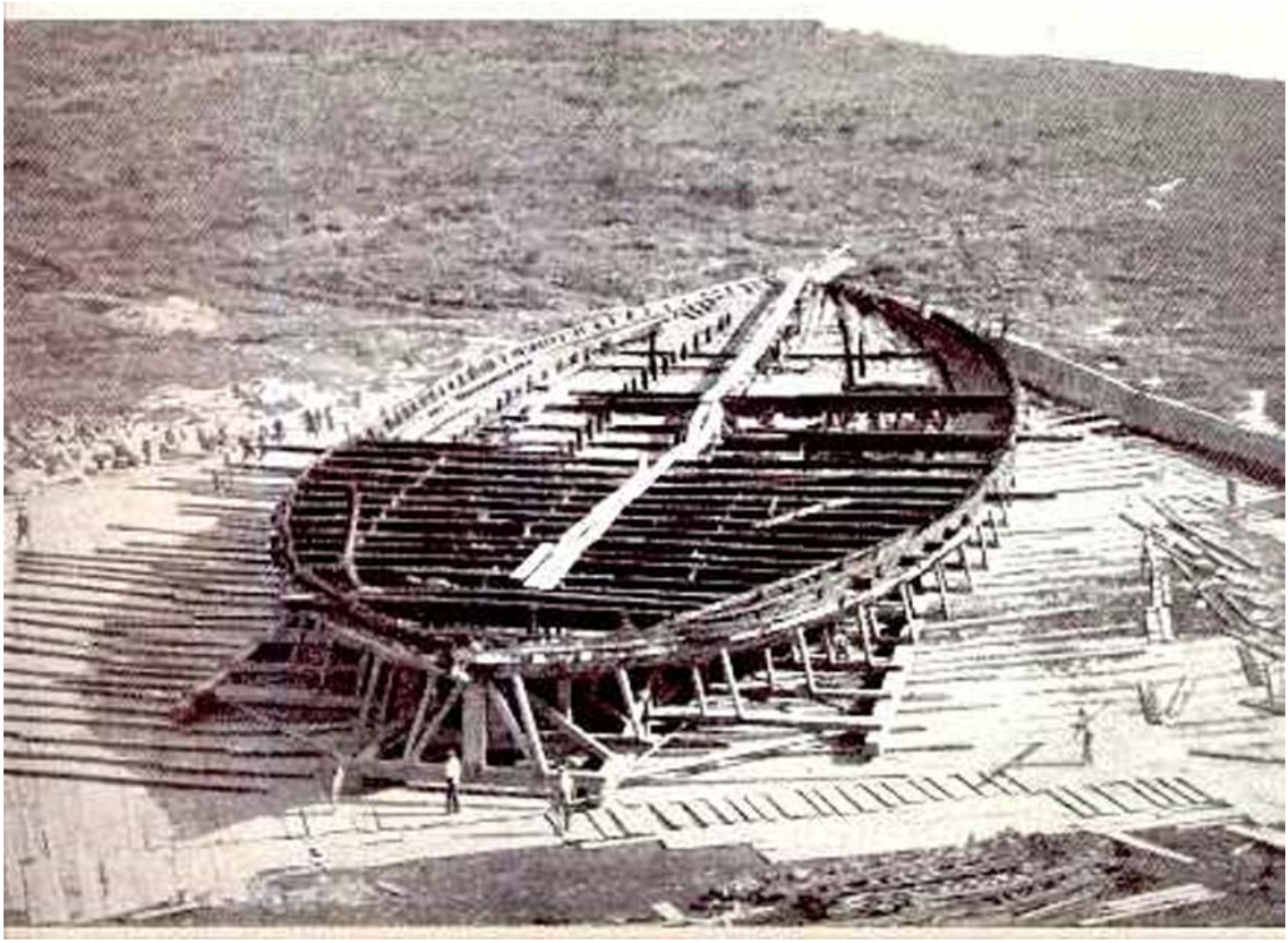
The excavations would take years, with the second ship not brought up until 1932.



The ships were vast, far larger than any vessel that had ever been recovered from the ancient would.

The largest was 73 meters (240 ft) in length, the same as an Airbus A380, & measured 24 meters (79 ft) across.

(see workmen in foreground for scale)

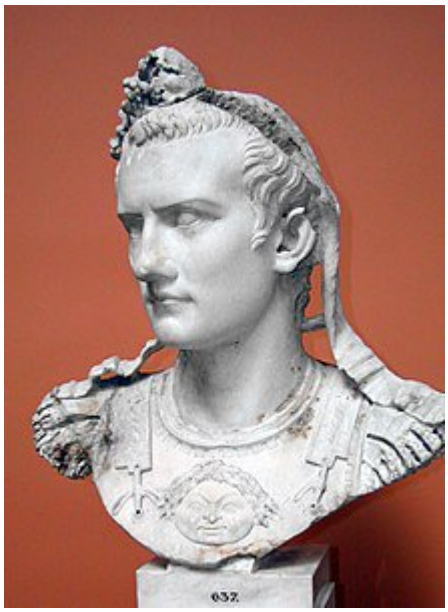


From inscriptions on lead pipes and tiles, it soon became clear that what had been discovered were the pleasure barges of the infamous 1st century Roman Emperor Caligula.



Caligula was Emperor for only 4 years, from 37-41 CE. While the first 6 months of his rule passed without incident, he soon became known for his sadism, hedonistic excess & brutality.

He demanded to be worshipped as a living God, & emptied the Imperial treasury in only 1 year.



Caligula may have built his ships on the tiny Lake Nemi due to its sacred significance, a fitting place for a living divinity.

The lake was known as "Diana's Mirror" since the reflection of the moon on its water could be seen from a temple onshore.

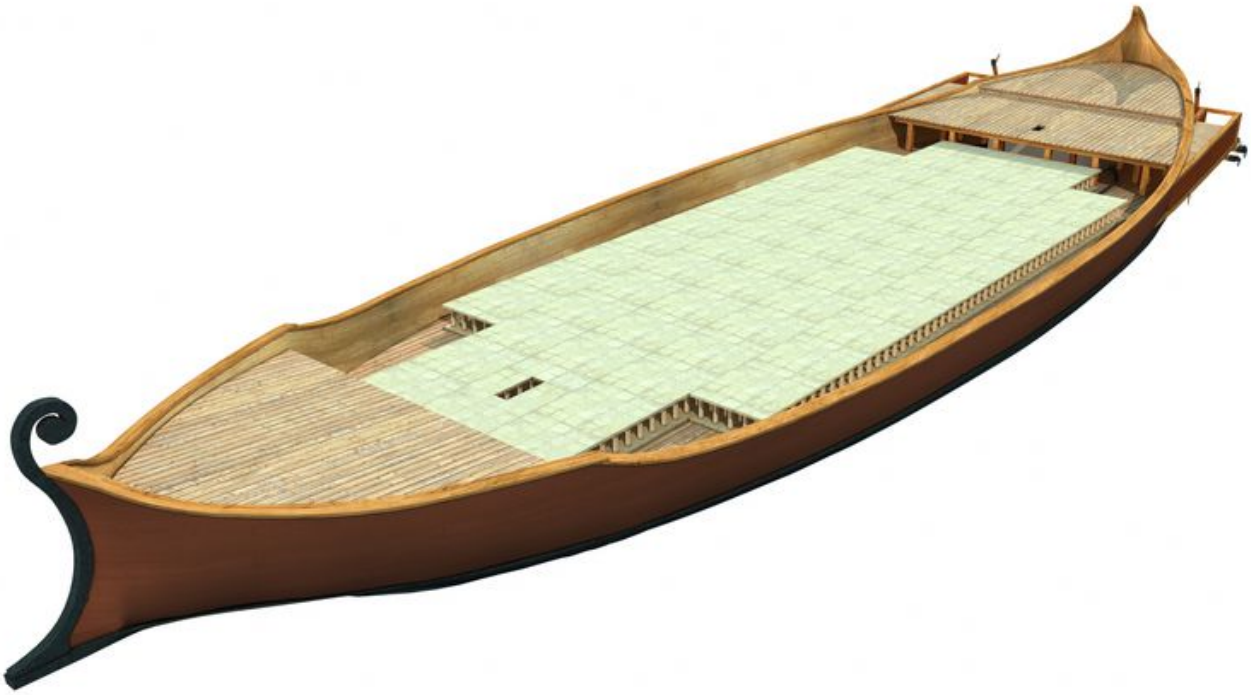
(■■Richard Wilson, 1800)



Caligula had two ships built. The largest, dubbed the "prima nave" (first ship) was an enormous vessel, steered with 11m oars.

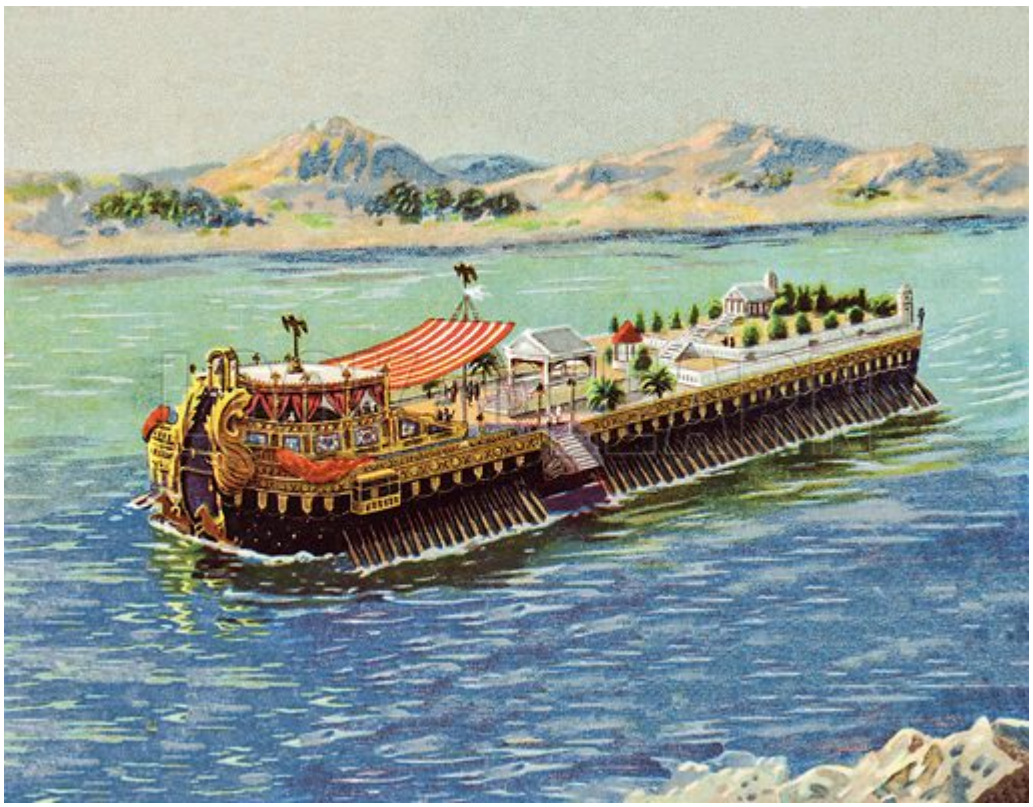
The 2nd was a giant floating platform replete with marble palaces, gardens, & a system of plumbing for baths.

(■Carlo Cestra https://t.co/U71ZBECaZ6)



Roman historian Seutonius described the sight of such ships: "Ten banks of oars… the poops of which blazed with jewels… filled with ample baths, galleries, and saloons, and supplied with a great variety of vines and fruit trees."

Source: https://t.co/DxdDQ638Ym



Until the discovery of the Nemi ships, it was thought that the Romans were incapable of building such large vessels.

Historians had assumed that measurements given for grain-carrying vessels in some ancient sources were exaggerations.

The Nemi ships show they may have been real.



While excavating at Lake Nemi, Italian archaeologists uncovered vast anchors, bronze mouldings and marble statues from the wrecks.

They found carvings & mosaics, even gilded copper roof tiles that would have shone spectacularly in the sun.



The expense of the vessels was enormous, with ornamental oar rings and joints in copper & bronze.

The wood was even coated with lead, a costly treatment designed to protect the wood of sea-going vessels from shipworms - here useless, since shipworms don't live in fresh water.



12 Seconda nave: l'appoggio di un timone con cassetta bronzea decorata con mano apotropaica (da G.Ucelli).

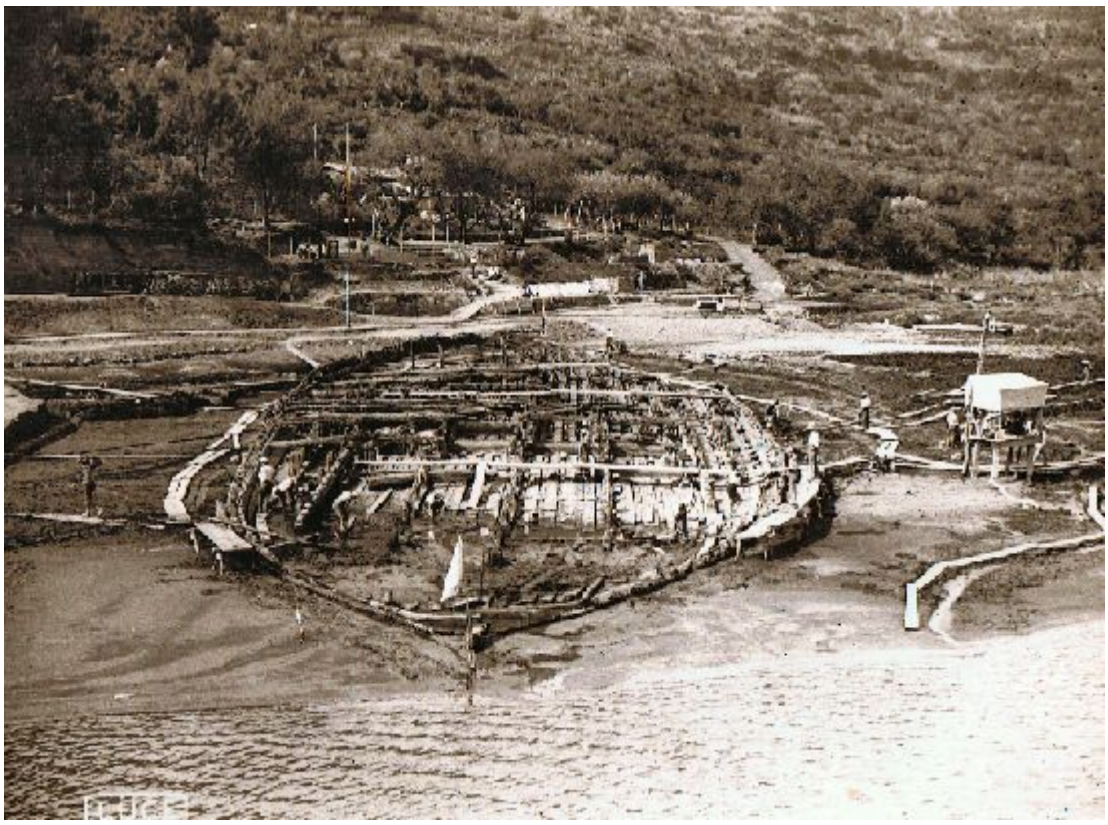
Despite their expense, these opulent palaces were afloat for only the briefest time. It seems they were only in use for about one year before Caligula's 4-year reign came to an end.

An alliance of senators & the Praetorian Guard ambushed him in a tunnel & stabbed him to death.



Attempts to restore the Republic after Caligula's death failed. The Roman military ignored the senate & reinstated Imperial monarchy.

But Caligula's barges, at least, went the way of their creator. Their hulls pierced, they were weighted with stones, & sank to the lake bottom.



For Mussolini, the recovery of the ships had been a significant triumph.

The Italian dictator had long claimed that he would revive the legacy of ancient Rome in the modern day. As the mud-soaked wrecks rose out of lake Nemi, it seemed a good metaphor for this revival.



He had a huge museum built in 1936 to house the wrecks, so that the public could visit.

But Mussolini, like Caligula, would soon face a fitting downfall. And the Nemi ships would follow him into the ashes of history.



On the night of May 31 1944, less than 4 years since Mussolini entered WWII in support of Hitler, Italy was on the brink of defeat, propped up by the Nazis.

It's not known whether the fires started as a result of US artillery or German arson. Either way, the Nemi ships burned.



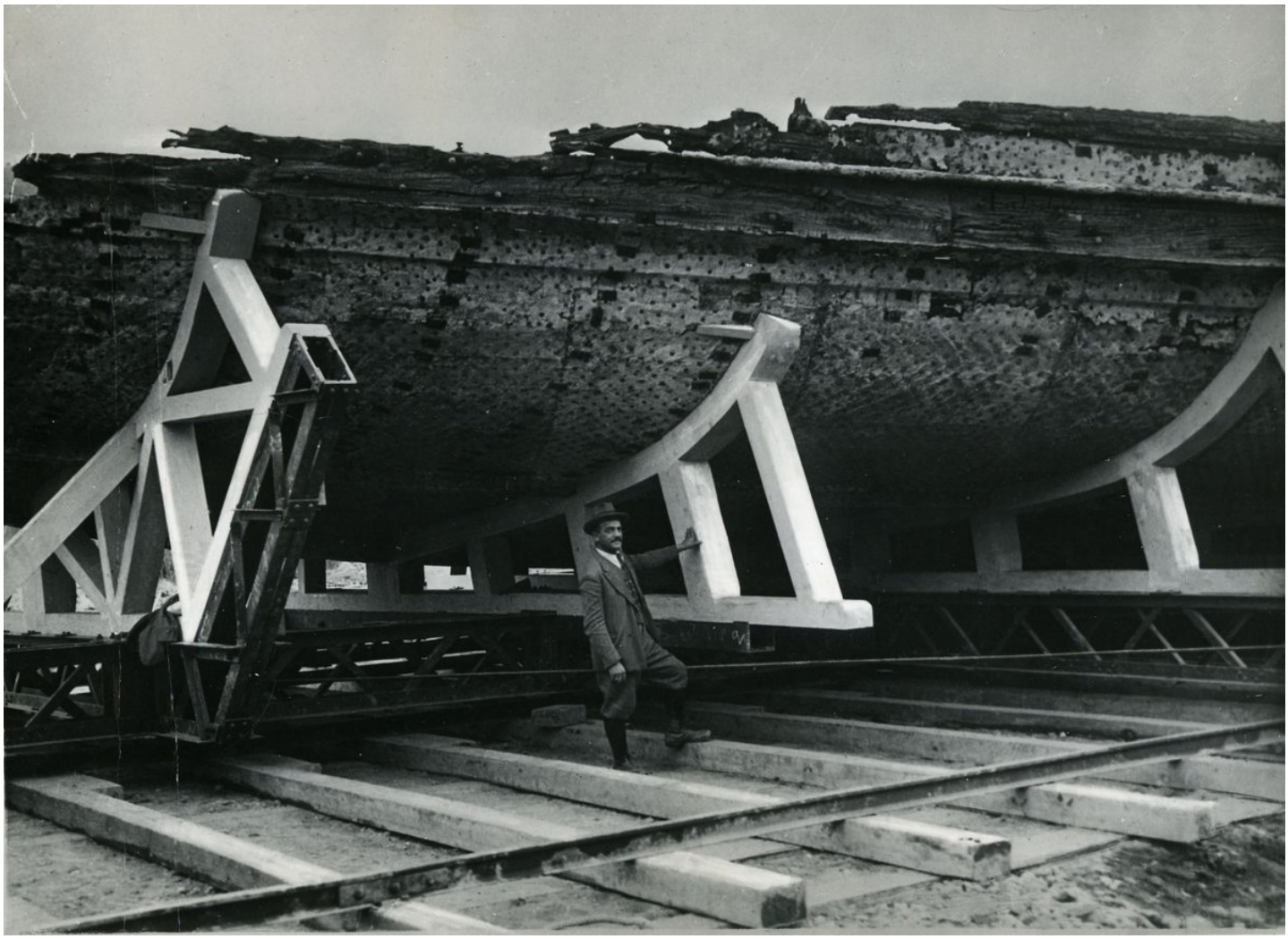
Only some bronzes survived, along with a handful of photographs of the colossal wrecks.

Like Caligula, Mussolini met an ignoble end. Less than a year after the ships burned, he was shot while fleeing Italy in disguise. Two days later, Hitler followed by shooting himself.



Today, the ghosts of the Nemi ships live only in their photographs, & the few remaining artefacts that survived the fire.

They form a haunting parable for those who would use the remains of the past for their own ends, while taking no heed of their warnings.



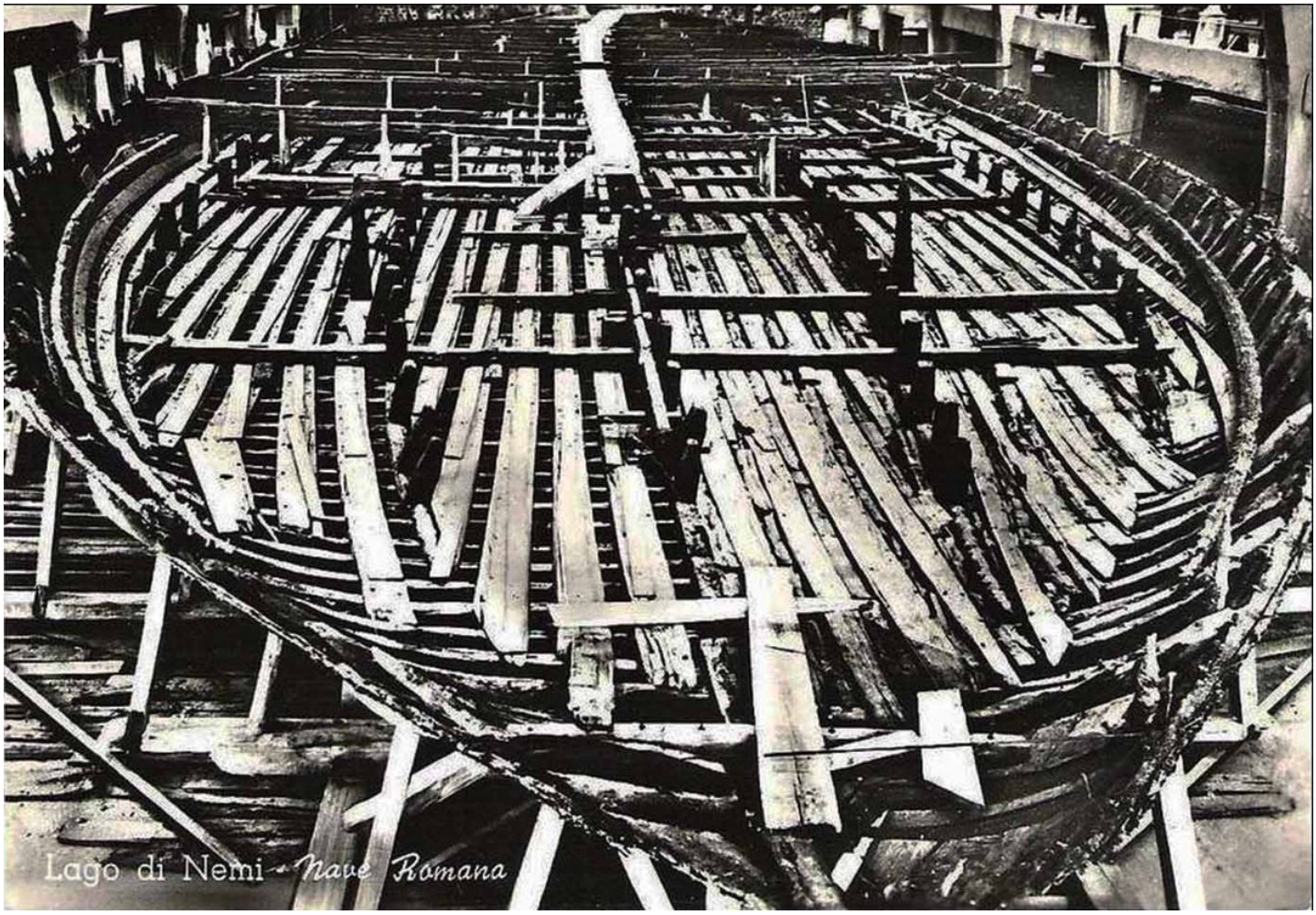
Some further reading:

- Report on Project Diana, Italian Navy: https://t.co/ej8roBEIyD

- Caligula's Floating Palaces: https://t.co/rvEtsO15eb

- Divers to scour lake for Emperor Caligula's ship: https://t.co/2zI2LbpGjd

The Nemi Ships (U Chicago): https://t.co/fXBzQiLXnG



Thanks for listening! If you found this interesting, I've put together more of my research into this thread. https://t.co/2IPGyXqXBT

> A thread-of-threads on my research into ruins: ancient, modern & imaginary.
>
> — Paul \U0001f339\U0001f4da Cooper (@PaulMMCooper) October 5, 2017

And if you'd like to chip me a tip for my time, you can do so here: https://t.co/ApOaRjDx4i