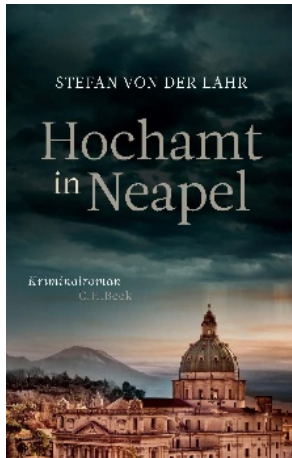


**“High Mass in Naples” by Stefan von der Lahr, January 2019, Verlag C.H.Beck, Munich, 365 pp.**



Roman and Neapolitan detectives are on the track of an international criminal network that is responsible for deaths in Naples caused by radioactive garbage. In order to conceal these crimes, murders have also been committed in Rome. Behind the crimes lie the Russian oligarch Pudanichev and the Neapolitan Camorra godfather Don Giglio, but since Naples needs the investments of the apparently honorable business people and their associates, the judiciary and the municipal administration protect them. Even some in the higher ranks of the clergy are involved in these shady goings-on, and make a financial profit from them.

However, these clergy have come to the notice of the auxiliary bishop of Naples, Gian Carlo Montebello, while he was investigating an archaeological sensation together with some of his staff. The papers of a former archbishop of Naples, Cardinal Sersale, had long been thought lost. They are now discovered and include a letter with concrete indications that the bones of Alexander the Great are in Naples, and most likely in the cathedral of the city.

No one knows where they are hidden. But finally, two of the clergy on the bishop’s staff interpret the clues correctly, and lead their colleagues into the cathedral crypt, where a large clay vessel contains not only the relics of *San Gennaro*, the patron of the city, but also—under a false bottom—the remains of Alexander the Great.

It seems that the day is ending on a happy note, since the environmental criminals have been unmasked on the same day, and many criminals have been arrested.

Now they stand before the goal of all their dreams. They are on the point of safely recovering a world-ranking archaeological treasure. Just at this moment, however, a completely unexpected guest appears on the scene: the oligarch Pudanichev. Unknown to them (but as the reader knows by now), he too has been following secretly the search for the Alexander the Great. Now he wants to get hold of his remains.

## Sample translation by Brian McNeil

“Bravo! Spoken like a genuine humanist!”

They whirled around and saw four men coming down the stairs that led, to the left of the statue of Cardinal Carafa, into the crypt. Two of the men carried bags. Montebello sprang up.

“Who are you? How did you get in here?”

“Ah, you must be Bishop Montebello. We saw your face on every television channel this evening—invariably accompanied by fantastic commentaries: ‘Assistant bishop in Naples stops Camorra clan,’ ‘New assistant bishop cleanses the Neapolitan catacombs of crime.’ Very pretty! You are famous. Perhaps you will become immortal when you die as a martyr—like your *San Gennaro*.”

His companions laughed at these words.

“I know that I am in the hands of God! Who are you and what are you looking for?”

“You disturbed quite many people today, and I am one of them. But unlike my partner Don Giglio, who was arrested, I am well protected. Nevertheless, I have to move on from here. Well, it’s not the first time ...”

“Then do us a favor and go back to where you came from!”

“That is precisely what I intend to do. But I don’t want to leave Naples without any souvenirs. You know how it is with tourists. But where is ...? Hey, you! You must be Jacqueline Napoletano, the archivist of the diocese. And you look like Father Luis, the Dominican priest, am I right? The world owes the greatest archaeological discovery of the twenty-first century to the two of you. I admire you, and I thank you! The tracks of Alexander the Great were buried for many centuries, and it was you who uncovered them. Countless classical scholars dreamed of that—dry as dust students of ancient languages, feeble historians, and a whole crowd of archaeologists who spent their days pointlessly and then swilled down their frustration with whisky at night in their excavation tents.

“But it was someone else who discovered the conqueror. And for that we are grateful to ... you! You must be Eugenio Silvestri. I must say, you look better than in the photographs of *TUTTA LA VERITÀ*, which can be seen right now in a continuous loop. You had the right ideas. As the Greeks say, EUREKA! I am glad that you made your discovery known in such unmistakable terms in the Bishop’s apartments. For otherwise, I might have had to leave Naples empty-handed.”

“How do you know this?”

“Today’s technological possibilities are great ... And you, Monsignor Sanna, will doubtless be pleased to hear that I shall take away with me what is left of the conqueror of the world. And I guarantee you that no one will ever know that he spent a couple of hundred

years as a subtenant of *San Gennaro*. I will think of a better story—because no one would believe that anyway. With the burial objects and DNA investigation, I will have no problem in establishing the link between the skull here and the dead persons in the cemetery of Vergina in Northern Greece, where the rest of Alexander’s family were buried more than two thousand years ago. But now I am chatting, and time is the only thing that I really do not have today.”

Pudanichev gave his men a sign, and they went to the altar that contained the clay vessel with the bones of Saint Januarius. Montebello took two big steps towards the Russian, who drew his pistol and pointed it at the bishop’s head.

“Not one more step! You got help this afternoon, but there is no policeman here who will help you.”

“What do you intend to do?”

“What I told you. We are going to take away what remains of Alexander.”

“You mean to break open the altar and extricate the urn? Are you crazy?”

“No more than all the other friends of classical antiquity.”

“You are committing a tremendous sacrilege if you desecrate these relics!”

“Oh, I have no intention of hurting religious feelings. If you prefer, then my men will open the reliquary, and you can take them out—the good ones are kept and the bad ones thrown away. But they won’t be thrown away this evening. We shall take them away in a bag. Is that better?”

Montebello turned and looked in bewilderment at his companions.

“Please do not harm the reliquary!”

“You heard what the Bishop said. Please be careful when you open that thing! As you see, we are not barbarians.”

“There have always been barbarians who felt awe in the presence of holy things, and who would never have touched such a reliquary.”

“Nobody’s perfect!”

The men had by now opened the altar rails and had entered the space around the altar. One of them folded up the altar cloths, while the other one took tools from one of the bags. They then used a heavy battery-powered screwdriver to remove the central pane of the three glass panes before the altar, and they immediately lifted the heavy clay vessel out of the reliquary and placed it on the floor.

“STOP!”

Montebello could no longer keep silence. He rushed past Pudanichev to the group, although they too were pointing guns at the bishop.

“Let me open the urn!”

Montebello heard Pudanichev laugh.

“Let him do it!”

Montebello turned around and spoke to Monsignor Silvestri.

“Would you help me?”

No harm was done to Silvestri as he went forward. The two men stood before the clay vessel and made the sign of the cross, and then they removed the covering. Montebello took out one part of the skeleton after another, and handed them to Silvestri, who laid bone after bone on the altar table. After a few minutes, Montebello turned to Pudanichev.

“Everything is out now. I can see the clay disk at the bottom.”

“Aha, now things are getting interesting. Go on with the work!”

Pudanichev gave one his companions a sign, and the man opened the other bag, which was padded with heavy blue satin. When Montebello put his hand back into the clay vessel, the oligarch joined him and took the clay disk from the bishop. When the bishop’s hand reached the surface again, Pudanichev’s eyes sparkled, because he recognized the golden diadem. He took it into his hands and lifted it to the light.

“HE wore this—in Egypt and on the throne in Babylon, while the great men of his world empire fell to the ground before him and paid him obeisance! Can you imagine that?”

Montebello turned away and put his hand once more into the urn.

“What is that? What do you have there! Show it to me!”

The Russian turned the little vessel this way and that. Its upper part consisted of a head, and its bulbous lower part was covered in pictures.

“Where is our archaeologist? Come here! You will never again get the chance to see anything like this! Tell me what it is!”

Berliner took the vessel and looked at it from various angles. He had to clear his throat before he was able to speak.

“This is Osiris—the mysterious god, the lord of silence. All the mysteries that concern him have to do with death. I am not surprised that a vessel with his portrait was placed in Alexander’s tomb. There is a city in the Nile delta, Canopus, where vessels like this with Osiris’ head were made, and where they venerated him in this form. The vessel contained the life-giving water of the Nile. The material must be ... alabaster. I cannot make out all the little pictures; it would have to be cleaned thoroughly first. I see Horus with the falcon’s head. He was the son of Isis and Osiris. The lowest figure, that spreads out its wings and carries everything, is a scarab. The god of the morning sun, Chepri, shows himself in this form. This here could be a bull of Apis, but I am not sure. When the sacred Apis bull died, it was equated

with Osiris. Listen! You don't seem to feel any great awe in the presence of holy objects. But this—this is a really grim matter. If I may give you some advice, put it all back in place and go before it's too late!"

Pudanichev looked incredulously at the archaeologist, then his face cleared and he began to laugh.

"This is really the funniest idea that anyone has ever used when they tried to trick me. No! You are perfectly correct. These objects do not interest me because of some religious nonsense. I want to have them because they are old, because they are unique, and because they are connect to a person who was superior to everyone else—a man whose empire stretched over three continents. There isn't a chance that you will make me afraid! Forget it! Just tell me instead what the bishop has in his hands now!"

Montebello handed the archaeologist the gold ring with the red gem. Berlin held it up to the light for a while.

"This must be Caracalla's ring. I would need a magnifying glass to be sure about the identity of the head that is carved in red carnelian, but it is well known that Caracalla placed his ring in Alexander's sarcophagus. Caracalla was a brutal debauchee, and his veneration of Alexander the Macedonian was a madness. But not even he dared to desecrate Alexander's tomb as completely as you intend. The mere fact that Caracalla touched the tomb was a bad omen for him, and he met a violent end—murdered by his own soldiers. Let that be a warning to you, and go away!"

"Mr. Berliner, I see that you are not only a competent teacher, but also a good entertainer. Then tell me about the coin that the bishop has now brought up."

"A silver tetradrachma. On the obverse is the ruler himself, with a lion's pelt over his head. This image is the symbol of Heracles, but the coin shows Alexander's portrait. He was the first ruler who made himself immortal with such a coin, and that was in the fourth century before Christ. On the reverse are the words ALEXANDROU BASILEOS — OF KING ALEXANDER. Alongside these words sits Zeus with the scepter in his left hand and the eagle in his right hand. Coins like this were issued during the lifetime of the ruler, when he had part of the treasure of the Persian Empire melted down to make coins and pay his soldiers. This coin was given to the dead man so that he could pay Charon, who brings all the dead across the river Acheron into Hades. Do you really believe that it will bring you good luck to steal the travel money from a dead man? Do you intend to use this coin to pay Charon?"

"You can't stop talking, Dr. Berliner! If I had the time, I would love to continue this amusing conversation with you. But that is unfortunately not possible."

Pudanichev slipped the coin into his trouser pocket.

"And now the best piece of all—bring it out!"

Montebello lowered his arm once more deep into the clay vessel, and even before his hand emerged again, Pudanichev had already recognized the skull. He rushed forward and tore it from Montebello's fingers. The oligarch's eyes devoured the great prize.

"Are these traces of injuries, Mr. Berliner? Look here — on the brow and the cheekbones?"

The archaeologist stepped closer and examined the skull. Astonishingly, only a few teeth were missing. He could clearly see a few notches that could certainly have been caused by injuries.

"It is hard to say, without a microscopic examination. But I would not exclude the possibility. Alexander's courage was a part of his charisma and of his success, and it became a part of his legend. He always fought in the frontline, and with the weapons that were used at that time, it was inevitable that he was also gravely wounded. There are ancient historians who write about that in detail — Curtius Rufus, for example, or Plutarch."

"That is fascinating. Tell us more!"

"There are too many passages!"

Pudanichev was not to be put off.

"Please!"

"Very well, then. Plutarch writes in his text about Alexander's courage or good luck. Alexander was hit by a stone on the head and by a club on the neck in Illyria. At the river Granikos, a spear wounded him in the head, and a sword is said to have wounded him on the hip at the battle near Issos. Near Gaza, an arrow struck his ankle. Near Maracanda, today's Samarkand, an arrow struck his shinbone. When he fought against the Assacanae in India, an arrow struck his shoulder. When he fought against the Gandaridae, an arrow struck him in the thigh, and finally, when he fought against the Mallians, an arrow wounded him in the breast. He escaped death by a hair's breadth when they took the city of the Mallians by storm—his closest companions protected him with their shields and with their own lives in the thick of battle."

Pudanichev's eyes sparkled.

"You are a poet! I would love to have someone like you for the long evenings to which I am now looking forward. What a pity ..."

Pudanichev turned the skull this way and that. Then he lifted it up.

"The head of Alexander the Great is the only worthy present for a man who is beginning his rule as the new emperor of the world! And Alexander will bring me back in great favor into this empire!"

He replaced the skull carefully in the bag.

“Bishop, I have to leave now. If you wish, you can put your Saint Januarius back in his old place.”

Montebello and Silvestro laid the bones in the clay vessel and replaced it in the altar. At a sign from Pudanichev, his men replaced the glass front and spread the altar cloth over the altar table.

“You see? You will have positive memories of me in the short time that remains to you!”

“What does that mean? What are you going to do to us?”

“Me? Nothing at all! My collaborators will do that.—Listen! Do you hear it? The fireworks have begun!”

Even in the crypt, they could hear the distant muffled noises of the exploding fireworks with which the Neapolitans celebrated the miraculous liquefaction of blood on the feast of their saint.

“You see—the noise of our own ‘fireworks’ will blend nicely into those noises!”

Pudanichev turned to one of his companions.

“Wait until I am outside! And as for you—when they find you here tomorrow, they will think it is an act of revenge by the Camorra, whom you brought to justice today. That is ok with me. By then, I will be far away from Naples. A remarkable city! But now it is time to be off. My true native land is waiting for me.”

With these words, he tapped on the bag.

“You can’t just have seven people killed”

Montebello stared at the oligarch.

“Oh, do you think that seven people are a lot?”

Pudanichev was already going up the stairs.

“Let me tell you, Bishop, that seven are nothing at all! Farewell!”

Two of his men followed him. The last man drew a pistol and spoke harshly to Montebello, Silvestri, and Berliner:

“Hey, go back to the others!”

The three men obeyed and went back to the two stone benches behind Cardinal Cafara. They could still hear Pudanichev’s steps fading away in the distance, until there was complete silence. So this would be the end. Jacky crouched close to Savio, who laid his arm around her. Dr. Berliner’s face was a mask of terror, and Montebello’s face was sad.

“I have one last request!”

The man released the safety catch on his gun, pointed it at Father Luis' head, and took two steps towards him.

“What do you want? Do you want to be the first to die?”

“If that is how it must be, then God's will be done! But a prisoner condemned to death always has one last wish. In all my life, I have never once smoked a cigarette. I would like to know how that feels before I die.”

The man with the gun could not believe his ears.

“WHAT did you say? Are you trying to make a fool of me?”

“No, I mean it! Please!”

Father Luis pointed to the Vicar General.

“But Monsignor Silvestri is a chain-smoker. I am sure that he has one—don't you?”

Eugenio Silvestri was just as puzzled as the killer. But he nodded.

“Yes, I do.”

“Then get on with it, give the idiot the damned cigarette! Come on! I want to get out of here this evening.”

The man took two more steps towards them, so that he was now standing directly between the two pillars that adjoined the benches. Silvestri fumbled in the inner pockets of his cassock. How odd—he had smoked for as long as he could remember, but at precisely this moment he felt no need to do so. What was the point of this absurd wish of Father Luis? He took a Nazionali out of its packet and gave it to him.

“Thank you. But I need a light.”

The Vicar General groped once more in his inner pockets until he found what he was looking for. He bent down and flicked the lighter once, twice, until the flame burned. Father Luis put the cigarette into his mouth, got up clumsily from the pence, and bent far forward. Then he made a movement, as if he wanted to grab the lighter with his right arm—and in the next moment a thin stream of fire shot out from his hand and hit the killer right in his face. While he screamed and tumbled backwards, he pulled his hands up and fired. Savio was on him at once, so that the killer's head smacked hard against the statue of Carafa. Savio kicked his hand, and the weapon skidded across the stone floor. Montebello ran after it and picked it up. When he turned around, the man was lying in a contorted heap on the floor. It was only gradually that Savio, who was sitting on him, realized that the killer had stopped moving. But what about Jackey and Eugenio Silvestri? They were crouching on the floor, bent over Father Luis.

“For God's sake, what has happened?”

“Quick, he's bleeding heavily. Call an ambulance!”



Montebello tried to type a number on his cell phone, but there was no reception down in the crypt.

“I have to go up and get onto the street.”

He rushed up the stairs and through the dark cathedral. His thoughts were a tumult: What had Father Luis done? Where had the stream of fire come from? How badly was he injured? While he ran to the exit, his hands searched the pockets of his trousers, and he remembered saying to Father Luis and Jackey, a few days ago, that one of the advantages of his new church position was that he had all the keys to the cathedral. His excitement was so great that he scarcely managed to find the keyhole of San Gennaro. But then he saw that the door was not in fact closed. All at once, he stood out on the street among hundreds of people who were celebrating, craning their necks to look up to the sky where one salvo of fireworks after another lit up the façade of the cathedral in every color under the sun. To begin with, no one noticed him in all the hubbub, but then a couple of onlookers recognized him and slapped him on the back. And finally, finally they heard what he was crying out, in his effort to drown out the din of the fireworks:

*“Aiuto! Ambulanza! Subito! Un medico d’urgenza! Subito! Aiuto! Aiuto!”*

An ambulance was stationed on the cathedral square that evening, and yet an eternity seemed to pass before the emergency doctor and paramedics ran through the church and sprang down the stairs to the crypt, where Father Luis was wrestling with death. They lifted him onto a stretcher and forced their way through the crowd to the university clinic. Montebello had insisted on accompanying him.

Pudanichev’s killer no longer needed a doctor. Abelardo Sanna had taken his place on the floor alongside him, and while he spoke his prayers, the undertakers waited behind the statue of Cardinal Carafa. Someone had informed Conti, who took down the statements by Jackey, Savio, and Lukas Berliner. The morning sky was already graying when Montebello rang Jackey and told her that Father Luis had been operated. The next few hours would be decisive.

“Do you know what Father Luis did down there in the crypt? Where did he get the fire from?”

“I’m not sure, but I know that Father Luis had a dermatosis on the hands. He told me a few weeks ago that he always carries a liquid disinfectant around with him. I believe that it is highly inflammable. He probably directed the flame from Monsignor Silvestri’s lighter onto the killer. He saved all our lives.”

There was silence for a moment, and then she heard Montebello speak again.

“Let us pray that he must not pay for that with his own life!”