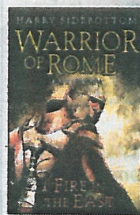


# Novel

## Building an empire



### WARRIOR OF ROME

#### Part One: Fire in the East

by Harry Sidebottom

BREASTS SWELL. Bodies of horses and men lie tangled. The publisher trumpets: "A story of empire, of heroes, of treachery, of courage, and most of all, a story of brutal, bloody warfare." The lionisation of war makes my blood run cold, but Dr Harry Sidebottom's prose blazes with such searing scholarship that there is enormous enjoyment in this rumbustious tale of the Late Roman Empire.

Our hero, Ballista — named after a weapon of mass destruction because of his "life-long fascination with such artillery machines" (the author too perhaps?) — is in the East, dealing with a territory that no longer wants to be part of the idea that is Rome. Ballista (a beleaguered "northerner") has a charismatic supporting cast; the Greek slave boy with a secret, the mercenary's Arabian daughter (all flaring imperious and tumbling ebony hair), the supercilious, patrician Roman and a huddle of *frumentarii* — state spies. All are thrown together by the mother city's juggernaut ambition and the East's sublime belief that it is Mesopotamia, not Rome, that should rule the world.

The gaudy pleasure of the book is that it takes the Late Roman world out of the pastel, Neo-Classical stage set of our imaginations and puts it back where it belongs; into tamarisk groves and the belligerent, burnt-amber sands of the Middle East. It also recognises that subject populations suddenly become sick of "doing what is ordered" (the mantra of the Roman Army). "You command us to be free, so we will be," as Pliny the Younger puts it.

Some characterisation is a little cartoonish, but there is no doubting the author's delight in acute, eye-opening gobbets; braziers that burn cinnamon, swastikas on the tunics of the *praefectus*, priests in tiaras. Sidebottom treads in the footsteps of the greatest mimetic historian-storytellers of the 18th and 19th centuries. He makes you feel as though you are there.

**BETTANY HUGHES**

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