

In the Shadow of the Sword: The Birth of Islam and the Rise of the Global Arab Empire

By Tom Holland

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The acclaimed author of *Rubicon* and other superb works of popular history now produces a thrillingly panoramic (and incredibly timely) account of the rise of Islam.

No less significant than the collapse of the Roman Republic or the Persian invasion of Greece, the evolution of the Arab empire is one of the supreme narratives of ancient history, a story dazzlingly rich in drama, character, and achievement. Just like the Romans, the Arabs came from nowhere to carve out a stupefyingly vast dominion—except that they achieved their conquests not over the course of centuries as the Romans did but in a matter of decades. Just like the Greeks during the Persian wars, they overcame seemingly insuperable odds to emerge triumphant against the greatest empire of the day—not by standing on the defensive, however, but by hurling themselves against all who lay in their path.

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In the Shadow of the Sword: The Birth of Islam and the Rise of the Global Arab Empire By Tom Holland **Bibliography**

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *In the Shadow of the Sword*:

"[Tom Holland's] **conclusions may be tentative, but they are convincing. His book is elegantly written and refreshingly free from specialist jargon. Marshaling its resources with dexterity, it is a veritable tour de force.**"—Malise Ruthven, *Wall Street Journal*

"Those unwilling to struggle through academic texts have long needed a guide to the story of Islam as it's understood by those with the fullest access to the latest linguistic and archaeological evidence. Now at last in Tom Holland's *In the Shadow of the Sword*, they finally have it.... **Holland—author previously of *Rubicon* and *Persian Fire*—is about as exciting a stylist as we have writing history today.... [This book is] accessible but delightful...as fun to read as any thriller, and with far richer intellectual nutritional content.**"—David Frum, *Daily Beast*

"**The life of Muhammad and the rise of Islam are boldly re-examined in this brilliantly provocative history.... [An] ambitious and...important book.... Holland is a skilful and energetic narrator, and while he guides us along the more intricate twists and turns of the period, he also keeps our eyes on the bigger story.**"—Anthony Sattin, *Guardian Observer* (London)

"[An] **elegant study** of the roiling era of internecine religious rivalry and epic strife that saw the nation of Islam rise and conquer.... **Holland confronts questions in the Quranic text head-on, providing a substantive, fluid exegesis on the original documents. Smoothly composed history and fine scholarship.**"—*Kirkus Reviews*

"**This is a book of extraordinary richness. I found myself amused, diverted and enchanted by turn. For Tom Holland has an enviable gift for summoning up the colour, the individuals and animation of the past, without sacrificing factual integrity. He writes with a contagious conviction that history is not only a fascinating tale in itself but is a well-honed instrument with which we can understand our neighbours and our own times, maybe even ourselves. He is also a divertingly inventive writer with a wicked wit – there's something of both Gibbon and Tom Wolfe in his writing... [and] he possesses a falcon eye for detail.... [A] spell-bindingly brilliant multiple portrait of the triumph of monotheism in the ancient world.**"—Barnaby Rogerson, the *Independent* (London)

"This dramatic investigation of the origins of Islam is both a **thrilling narrative history and a compelling piece of detective work.... A compelling detective story of the highest order, *In the Shadow of the Sword* is also a dazzlingly colourful journey into the world of late antiquity.** We encounter brain-eating demons; a caliph with such oral-hygiene problems that he could kill a fly with one breath; and that old favourite, St Simeon Stylites, rotting away on his pillar but still managing to miraculously cure a man with unfeasibly large testicles, "like a pair of clay jars". **Every bit as thrilling a narrative history as Holland's previous works, *In the Shadow of the Sword* is also a profoundly important book. It makes public and popular**

what scholarship has been

discovering for several decades now: and those discoveries suggest a wholesale revision of where Islam came from and what it is."—Christopher Hart, *Sunday Times* (London)

"[M]agnificent...and brave....The historian and author of *Rubicon* and *Persian Fire* has now, after five years' work, come up with *In the Shadow of the Sword*. His story is so compellingly told that it could almost be Dan Brown, except that Holland writes brilliantly, with a simultaneously dashing, meticulous and at times ravishingly camp style, and his tale is true."—Michael Bywater, *The Week* (London)

"Tom Holland is a writer of clarity and expertise, who talks us through this unfamiliar and crowded territory with energy and some dry wit.... [T]he emergence of Islam is a notoriously risky subject, so a confident historian who is able to explain where this great religion came from without illusion or dissimulation has us greatly in his debt."—Philip Hensher, *The Spectator* (London)

Praise for *The Forge of Christendom*

"An entertaining account of the fraught last years of the Dark Ages."— *The Wall Street Journal*

"An enjoyable and exuberantly argued book . . . Holland combines sound scholarly credentials with a gift for storytelling on a magisterial scale . . . In a tightly woven and sometimes witty narrative, [Holland demonstrates] the subtle interplay of genuine religious sentiment and cynical power politics."—*The Economist*

"[This] is narrative history in the grand manner, written with the panache and confidence we associate with the great historians of the 18th and 19th centuries."—Allan Massie, *The Daily Telegraph*

"A superb, fascinating and erudite medieval banquet."
—Simon Sebag-Montefiore, *Evening Standard*

Praise for *Persian Fire*

"Excellent . . . Holland is a cool-headed historian who writes here no less authoritatively and engagingly on classical Greece than he did on ancient Rome in his last book, *Rubicon*."—Mary Beard, *The Times Literary Supplement*

"It is . . . a testament to Holland's superlative powers as a narrative historian that he brings this tumultuous, epoch-making period dazzlingly to life, and makes the common reader familiar again with one of the most thrilling periods in world history." —William Napier, *The Independent*

Praise for *Rubicon*

"Not since Ronald Syme's *The Roman Revolution* has there been such an original and enlivening piece of Roman history. Tom Holland has the rare gift of making deep scholarship accessible and exciting. A brilliant and completely absorbing study."—A.N. Wilson

“A book that really held me, in fact, obsessed me . . . Narrative history at its best.” –Ian McEwan, *The Guardian*, Books of the Year

“Richly resonant. . . . Ancient history lives in this vivid chronicle.”—*Booklist* (starred review)

About the Author

Historian Tom Holland is the author of the works of history *Rubicon*, *Persian Fire*, and *The Forge of Christendom*. He reviews regularly for the *TLS*, and has adapted Homer, Herodotus, Thucydides, and Virgil for BBC Radio. *Rubicon* was short-listed for the Samuel Johnson Prize and won the 2004 Hessel-Tiltman Prize for History, and *Persian Fire* won the Anglo-Hellenic League's 2006 Runciman Award.

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1

Known Unknowns

Between Two Worlds

Yusuf As'ar Yath'ar, an Arab king celebrated for his long hair, his piety and his utter ruthlessness, had been brought to defeat. Leaving the reek of the battlefield, he rode his blood-flecked white charger down to the very edge of the Red Sea. Behind him, he knew, Christian outliers would already be advancing against his palace--to seize his treasury, to capture his queen. Certainly, his conquerors had no cause to show him mercy. Few were more notorious among the Christians than Yusuf. Two years previously, looking to secure the south-west of Arabia for his own faith, he had captured their regional stronghold of Najran. What had happened next was a matter of shock and horror to Christians far beyond the limits of Himyar, the kingdom on the Red Sea that Yusuf had ruled, on and off, for just under a decade. The local church, with the bishop and a great multitude of his followers locked inside, had been put to the torch. A group of virgins, hurrying to join them, had hurled themselves on to the flames, crying defiantly as they did so how sweet it was to breathe in "the scent of burning priests!"¹ Another woman, "whose face no one had ever seen outside the door of her house and who had never walked during the day in the city,"² had torn off her headscarf, the better to reproach the king. Yusuf, in his fury, had ordered her daughter and granddaughter killed before her, their blood poured down her throat, and then her own head to be sent flying.

Martyrdoms such as these, feted though they were by the Church, could not readily be forgiven. A great army, crossing from the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia, had duly landed in Himyar. The defenders had been cornered, engaged and routed. Now, with the shallows of the Red Sea lapping at his horse's hooves, Yusuf had come to the end of the road. Not all his obedience to the laws granted to God's chosen prophet had been sufficient to save him from ruin. Slowly, he urged his horse forwards, breasting the water, until at last, weighed down by his armour, he disappeared beneath the waves. So perished Yusuf As'ar Yath'ar: the last Jewish king ever to rule in Arabia.

The collapse of the kingdom of the Himyarites in ad 525 is not, it is fair to say, one of the more celebrated episodes of ancient history. Himyar itself, despite having prospered for some six centuries until its final overthrow under Yusuf, lacks the ready brand recognition today of a Babylon, or an Athens, or a Rome. Unsurprisingly so, perhaps: for southern Arabia, then as now, was firmly peripheral to the major centres of civilisation. Even the Arabs themselves, whom the peoples of more settled lands tended to dismiss as notorious brutes--"of all the nations of the earth, the most despised and insignificant"³--might look askance at the presumed barbarities of the region. The Himyarites, so one Arab poet reported in shocked tones, left their women uncircumcised, "and do not think it disgusting to eat locusts."⁴ Behaviour that clearly branded them as beyond the pale.

Yet, it is not only in terms of its geography that Himyar seems to lie in shadow. Similarly obscure is the period in which the death of Yusuf occurred. The sixth century ad defies precise categorisation. It seems to stand between two ages. If it looks back to the world of classical civilisation, then so also does it look forward to the world of the Crusades. Historians categorise it, and the centuries either side of it, as "late antiquity": a phrase that conveys a sense of lengthening shadows, and the Middle Ages soon to come.

For anyone accustomed to thinking of history as a succession of neatly defined and self-enclosed epochs, there is something vaguely unsettling about this. Rather like the scientist in the classic horror film *The Fly*, who ends up a mutant combination of human and insect, the world of late antiquity can seem, from our own perspective, peculiarly hybrid. Far beyond the borders of Yusuf's Himyarite kingdom, empires raised on fabulously ancient foundations still dominated the Near East and the Mediterranean, as they had done for centuries. Yet, their very age served only to highlight how profoundly they were coming to slip the moorings of their past. Take, for instance, the region immediately to the north of Arabia: the land we know today as Iraq. Here, across mudflats that had witnessed the dawn of urban civilisation, loyalty was owed to a king who was, just as his predecessor had been a whole millennium previously, a Persian. His dominions, like those of the Persian Empire that had existed a thousand years before, stretched eastwards to the frontiers of India, and deep into Central Asia. The splendours of the court over which he presided, the magnificence of its rituals, and the immodesty of his pretensions: all would have been perfectly familiar to a king of Babylon. That this was so, however, had been almost forgotten by the people of Iraq themselves. A spreading amnesia was blotting out memories that had endured for millennia. Even the Persians, far from venerating the truth about their glorious imperial heritage, had begun to obscure and distort it. The legacy of Iraq's incomparable history lived on--preserved in the Persians' fantasies of global rule and in the many glories that lent such fantasies credence--but increasingly it wore the look, not of ages departed, but of something new.

Other superpowers were less neglectful of their pasts. The great cities of the Mediterranean, built of stone and marble rather than the mud-bricks favoured by the people of Iraq, were less prone to crumbling into dust. The empire that ruled them likewise wore, in 525, a veneer of venerable indestructibility. Even to the Persians, Roman might appeared something primordial. "God so arranged things," they would occasionally acknowledge, albeit through gritted teeth, "that the whole world was lit up from the beginning by two eyes: namely, by the wise rulers of the Persian realm, and by the powerful empire of the Romans."⁵ Nevertheless, the Romans themselves, although certainly never averse to flattery, knew better. Rather than believing that their empire had existed since the dawn of time, they knew perfectly well that all its greatness had evolved from nothing. To trace the course of that evolution might therefore be to fathom the secrets of its success. Even as Yusuf was vanishing into the Red Sea, plans were being laid in the Roman capital for an immense ransacking of libraries and archives, an unprecedented labour of scholarship whose goal was the preservation for all eternity of the empire's vast inheritance of laws. This was no arid, merely antiquarian project. History, no less than armies or gold, had come to function as one of the sinews of the Roman state. It offered the empire reassurance that it was precisely what it claimed to be: the model of human order. How, then, was the prestige of Caesar to be maintained, if not by a perpetual trumpeting of Rome's triumphant antiquity?

The challenge for Roman policy-makers, of course, was that the glories of the past did not necessarily provide them with a reliable guide for the future. Indisputably, the empire remained what it had been for almost a millennium: the most formidable superpower of all. Wealthier and more populous than its great Persian rival, its hold over the eastern Mediterranean, always the richer half, appeared secure. From the mountains of the Balkans to the deserts of Egypt, Caesar ruled them all. Nevertheless, it was clearly an embarrassment, to put it mildly, that what had once been the western half of Rome's empire had ceased, by 525, to be Roman at all. Over the course of the previous century, an immense swath of her holdings, like a sandcastle battered by the waves of an incoming tide, had crumbled utterly away. Britain had been lost as early as 410. Other provinces, over the succeeding decades, had followed. By the end of the century, the entire western half of the empire, even Italy, even Rome itself, had gone. In place of the venerable imperial order there was now a patchwork of independent kingdoms, all of them--with the exception of a few in western Britain--ruled by warrior elites from beyond the limits of the former empire. The relationship that existed between the natives and these "barbarian" newcomers varied from realm to realm: some, like the Britons, fought the invaders tooth and nail; others, like the Italians, were given to hailing them as though they were Caesars. Yet, in every case, the empire's collapse resulted in the forging of new identities, new values, new presumptions. These, over the long term, would lead to the establishment of a radically new political order in western Europe. Rome's abandoned provinces would never again acknowledge a single master.

Time would see both the great empires of the age--the Persian as well as the Roman--go the way of Nineveh and Tyre. Not so the states established in Rome's western provinces, some of which still commemorate in their modern names the intrusions back in late antiquity of barbarian war bands. Small wonder, then, that European historians have traditionally seen the arrival of the Franks in the land that would eventually become France, and of the Angles in the future England, as events of far greater long-term significance than the activities of any Caesar or Persian king. We know now, as their contemporaries did not, that ruin was stalking both the rival empires. A century on from the collapse of the Himyarite kingdom, and the two superpowers were staring into the abyss. That the Persian Empire would end up toppled completely while that of the Romans was left as little more than a mangled trunk, has traditionally served to mark them as dead-ends, bed-blockers, dinosaurs. How tempting it is to presume, then, that they must have perished of decrepitude and old age. The lateness of late antiquity, to those who trace in it only a calamitous arc of decline and fall, has the quality of dinner guests who refuse to get their coats once the party is over.

Except that the empires raised by the peoples of the age wer...

Users Review

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