

# 'Ship of Rome'

## By John Stack

### Review by Jonathan Aird

John Stack's first novel is -- but of course -- the first of a series set in Ancient Rome. What differentiates it from so many others is that it is Rome at the time of the Punic Wars. And, although this is a novel of Roman warfare, it is, for once, warfare under oars.

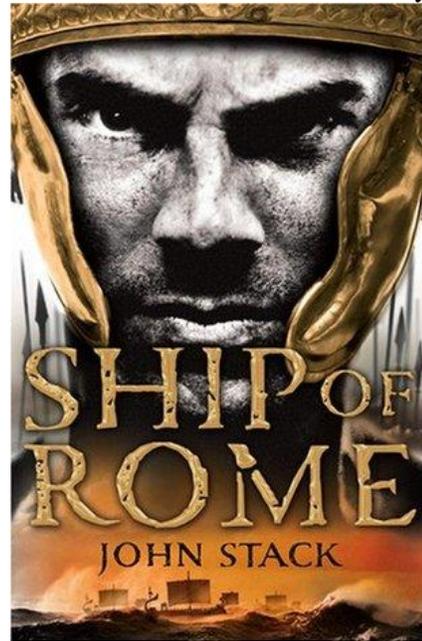
Atticus is a Roman galley captain with mixed emotions ó as a Greek he is continually faced with suspicion from true Romans; however, as a dweller on the Calabrian coast with family under constant threat from pirates, his fate is tied to the continuation of Roman sea power ó such as it is. His quantity of woes is made complete by the addition to his ship of the Roman centurion Septimus, who, in order to get a promotion, has switched from the regular army to the rather despised marines. However, when Atticus shows his skills in battle with a superior Carthaginian squadron, Septimus finds a grudging respect turning to friendship.

The main plot of 'Ship of Rome' is that Carthage has sent its fleet, under the repugnant Hannibal Gisco, to recapture the lost Carthaginian colony of Sicily ó and as this becomes apparent Atticus gets drawn ever further into the plans for a naval response to this dominant Mediterranean fleet. This takes him into the sphere of influence of consuls Scipio and Duilius. Whilst Rome's power has to be defended, there is still plenty of time to undertake political intrigues as these two vie for power.

Stack skilfully unfolds this tale of conniving and backbiting, as well as spending plenty of time with Atticus and Septimus as the one develops a 'super weapon' to defeat the superior Carthaginian numbers (wargamers may guess what this is quite early on), and the other sets about turning the land-based legions into marines, and the existing marines into a highly effective weapon in their own right.

'Ship of Rome' bowls along at a great pace, and cleverly undermines the reader's expectations of the behaviour of some of the main characters. For the novelty both of the chosen war and the concentration on warfare at sea ó the land war on Sicily is not completely ignored though ó 'Ship of Rome' scores highly. There is less attention to the details of individual combats, which to my mind is an advantage ó endless descriptions of punches, feints with a blade, hot blood spurting into faces and so forth become somewhat tedious after a while, so full marks to John Stark for not thickening his novel that way! It is true that occasionally there are sections where the reader raises an eyebrow and mentally declares 'Sir, your research is showing,' but these don't happen too often and they do serve to illuminate some of the niceties of galley warfare, so can be mostly forgiven.

What we have here, then, is a first-rate debut and I can't wait to read the continuation of the saga. It goes without saying that there's plenty of grist to the wargamer's mill in this book ó



for inspiration value, it scores very high indeed and I'd anticipate that there will be the raising of many a miniature fleet following on from the reading of "Ship of Rome."

ISBN 978-0-00-728524-2