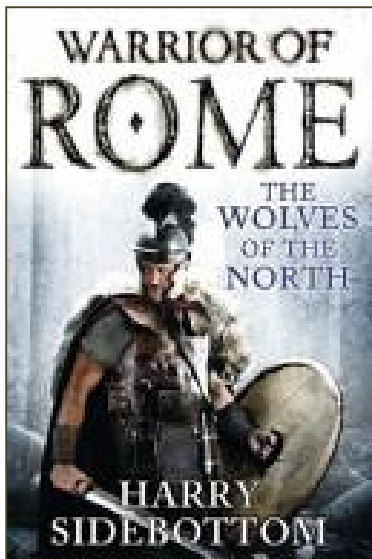


Warrior of Rome: Wolves of the North

By Harry Sidebottom

Review by Jonathan Aird

This is the fifth volume in the Warrior of Rome series and I suppose I should confess straight away that I have not read the previous four. This was picked up on a whim as a second-hand copy to test the waters so to speak and if it was any good, I could always root out the previous volumes. Having read it, I am pretty sure it is a good book, but I am not sure that I will be rooting out the previous volumes.



From the cover, one would imagine this is a typical entry in the Roman Army sub-genre of historical novels and this isn't quite the case. True, the hero, Marcus Clodius Ballista, has clearly seen plenty of military action in previous novels but he is now an out-of-favour special envoy for the Emperor Gallienus, sent on an almost impossible task to the open Steppe. Here, he is to ransom Roman captives, and break a treaty between the nomad tribes which threaten the Roman Empire. To make things interesting, there is a subplot of an insane serial killer who kills and then mutilates slaves along the way.

Harry Sidebottom pulls few punches in depicting the world of 263 AD as brutal in the extreme. As is usual for this style of fiction, Ballista has a few loyal followers. Instead of Sharpe's chosen men, we have Ballista's *familia* and a mix from across the Roman Empire of freedmen and slaves who are bound to him through various different bonds of loyalty or obligation. In general terms, they are a violent group of womanising drunkards, some of whom are believed even by their peer group to be dangerously insane and still useful fighters. Ballista himself is no angel: he, and his familia, travel under a dreadful curse from a priestess of Hecate that he had taken as a lover in a previous novel. The belief and almost equal disbelief in the supernatural is finely handled in the novel: when things go badly, the curse is often alluded to and but when a soothsayer finds bad omens for travel it is quickly suggested that he try again to find better ones. Several characters are haunted by, or communicate with, daemons and there is no doubting their belief in what they see and hear.

From the start of the Roman envoy's arrival in the Bosphorus, things go awry and there are delays in arranging travel, and then a less-than-direct route to the heart of the territory of the Heruli, the tribe he must visit, is adopted. These delays allow for several groups of Alani tribesmen to ambush them along the way, and also allow for the further murder and mutilation of a number of slaves. As well as this killer in his midst, Ballista also has to contend with the knowledge that there are also Imperial spies within his diplomatic retinue who will be looking to undermine him along the way. This all makes for a fast-paced story, with the Romans increasingly out of their depths as they travel further into the unknown and to them very strange Steppe with its constant challenges and the landscape is confusing, the various tribes they encounter exhibit cultures far removed from their own, and a lot of people want to kill them. The depiction of violence is done in a cinematic way: there is a lot

less detail of individual sword blows and a lot more detail as to where blood and brains end up as a result of blows that strike home. There are any number of skirmishes and battles from the relatively small to the very large indeed which are inspirational in the extreme for the wargamer ó one wonders if the author has ever been involved in the hobby, as the prelude to one battle description read very much like someone laying their figures out for a game ó probably under WRG 5th Edition!

What makes this book more interesting than some is the cultural depiction, some of which sits easier than other parts. There is a recurring theme throughout the book of the terms and conditions of slavery in different cultures ó with the Romans discovering that the Steppe peoples have very different ideas about what slavery and freedom entails. The main characters are, for the most part, believable ó a few of the less prominent characters do blend into one after a while which makes the handy reference guide at the back of the book useful. In a Tolkien-like way (and Harry Sidebottom has admitted to a youthful Tolkien phase) characters will frequently quote appropriately from the great poets. This doesn't always come across as naturally as their more frequent discussions of sexual prowess and general swearing. It's strange, isn't it, that Hornblower sailed the world and yet never said the F-word -- but Ballista and company more than make up for this. Interestingly, the Romans, then, come across as violent, rapacious and yet cultured. Additionally, as is seemingly becoming *de rigueur* in the world of ðhistorical fiction for menö there are no really positive depictions of women ó they are sexual playthings or ugly crones.

The book is also peppered with little references ó some of these are our old friend the disguised scenario, where a military event from a different era is portrayed in the novel. There are some schoolboyish jokes: that Harry Sidebottom can, and does, prove that names like Biomastos and Masterbates are genuine names of the period only goes to prove that he has put them in for a snigger (particularly true when one considers that Masterbates is a eunuch). To be fair there are some better literary and self-deprecating jokes, but I won't give these away. Another thing that jarred at first was characters that dropped Latin words into their conversation seemingly just to get the reader to look up the translation/explanation in the historical appendix ó but after a while one just gets used to it. Overall, ðThe Wolves of The Northö is a pretty good read. Harry Sidebottom as a university lecturer on the period clearly knows his history which helps make things more believable and gives a true sense of place. The serial killer subplot is well handled ó with many false clues as to whom the killer might be ó keeping the identity obscure even as the list of potential names gets shorter and shorter through a combination of murders and death in battle. If there is a competition to be the author whose stories are the most violent and portray the most sadistic tortures, then Harry Sidebottom must be well ahead. That being said the violence, the misogyny, the sadism all ring true; it is just that there are no more heroes anymore and it is more honest to accept that Ballista and his men are but little different from the men they oppose.

As mentioned at the start, my copy was second-hand ó the book has been out a few years now ó and copies of the paperback can be picked up from Amazon for £0.01 + postage. I was amused to see that there is an unabridged audio version available ó perhaps not the best choice for the next long car journey with the family!

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