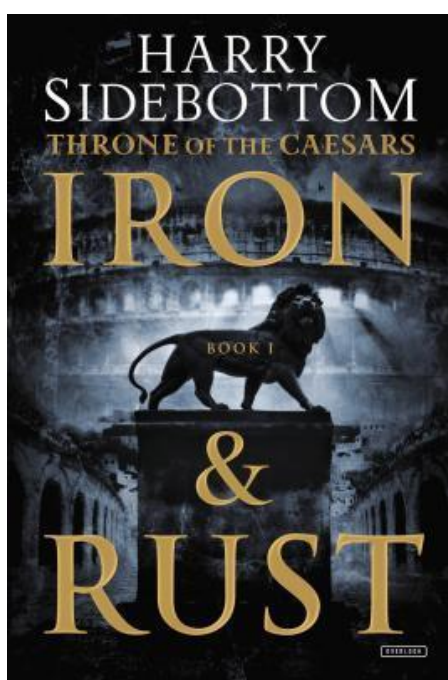


# Throne of the Caesars: Iron & Rust By Harry Sidebottom

Review by Jonathan Aird

Harry Sidebottom already has a well-known Roman Army series of novels - the Warrior of Rome saga – but this is something a bit different. We're still in Rome – that is his “period” as a university lecturer -- but this is 235AD and we're concerned with the political intrigues of the “year of six Caesars.” Not that the military side is completely absent, with the army having such a large part to play in the making and the breaking of



emperors that's hardly surprising. However, mostly we spend time with the upper end of the officer classes, those nobility doing their civic duty often as a means to further and more prestigious (and lucrative) appointments. It's an interesting approach – more “I, Claudius” than “Under the Eagle.” Iron & Rust came out in 2014 and it is the first novel in what became a trilogy, completed in 2016.

Rome is in a perilous position – it has a vast empire, and everyone outside the empire hates Rome and wants to avoid being absorbed into an even bigger empire. The army is vast, it is expensive and its fickle loyalty is often bought

by those willing to make the promise of more pay. A dangerous thing for emperors, as Alexander Severus discovers in the opening chapters. His unhinged court is depicted as sinking into an abyss of foolishness, which is brought to an abrupt end by violent overthrow. The new emperor is Maximinus and he is of a different cut – a man of the army, a citizen but with Thracian ancestry, not overly educated but shrewd in the ways of war and happiest when amongst the legions. Singularly, he's an emperor who believes in leading a campaign himself, and in battle puts himself into the fray where he is most needed. As the novel progresses, he becomes more and more like Conan the Barbarian in the phase of his ascent where he had become King of Aquilonia! Maximinus also becomes a problem for those who had promoted him – they are

disappointed to discover that they had been wrong to have thought he would be easy to control and that they could be puppet masters behind the scenes.

The novel proceeds with the leading men of Rome trying to fit in with the new regime – whilst at the same time serving their own ambitions. The women of Rome are also more or less active participants in the political realm – either as pawns in marriage schemes or scheming themselves to procure powerful or influential husbands or lovers as a way to progress their family prestige. Some of these intrigues lead to declarations by rival emperors – some willingly, some very unwilling and rightfully fearful of their fates – that disrupt any attempts at a smooth regime change and the efficient running of the empire.

For the wargamer, there are a number of battles – from relatively small skirmishes which adhere glory to ambitious men to much larger encounters when the Emperor Maximinus decides to resolve the continual threat to Rome’s northern border by taking the legions deep into barbarian territory. The climactic battle of that campaign is an excellent extrapolation of recent archaeological discoveries and offers some inspiration for reproduction of the whole, or parts, on the tabletop. The historical notes that explain the chapter on the battle also offer some thoughts on alternative interpretations so it is a battle that could be explored with a number of “what ifs?”

Whilst *Iron and Rust* is an enjoyable read, Harry Sidebottom does demonstrate two somewhat annoying writing “ticks.” Firstly, using short sentences. He likes short sentences. Four words are plenty. Like low literacy books. It can seem patronizing. Secondly, he does like to do the exact opposite as well particularly when introducing characters in big bunches – to have a single paragraph bring in half a dozen or more new characters, and preferably all with two or three names and nicknames and probably with at least two of them sharing at least one name – is not at all unusual. Hence the need for the 10 pages of maps, a two-page summary of the main characters, a 10-page historical note, a 26-page glossary and a 14-page full character roster – making in total a full 15% of the page count! I enjoyed *Iron and Rust* enough, though, to be keeping an eye out for the subsequent two volumes – at least there’s no risk of embarking on a never ending saga.

**Harper Collins (2014)**

**ISBN 978-0-00-749984-7**