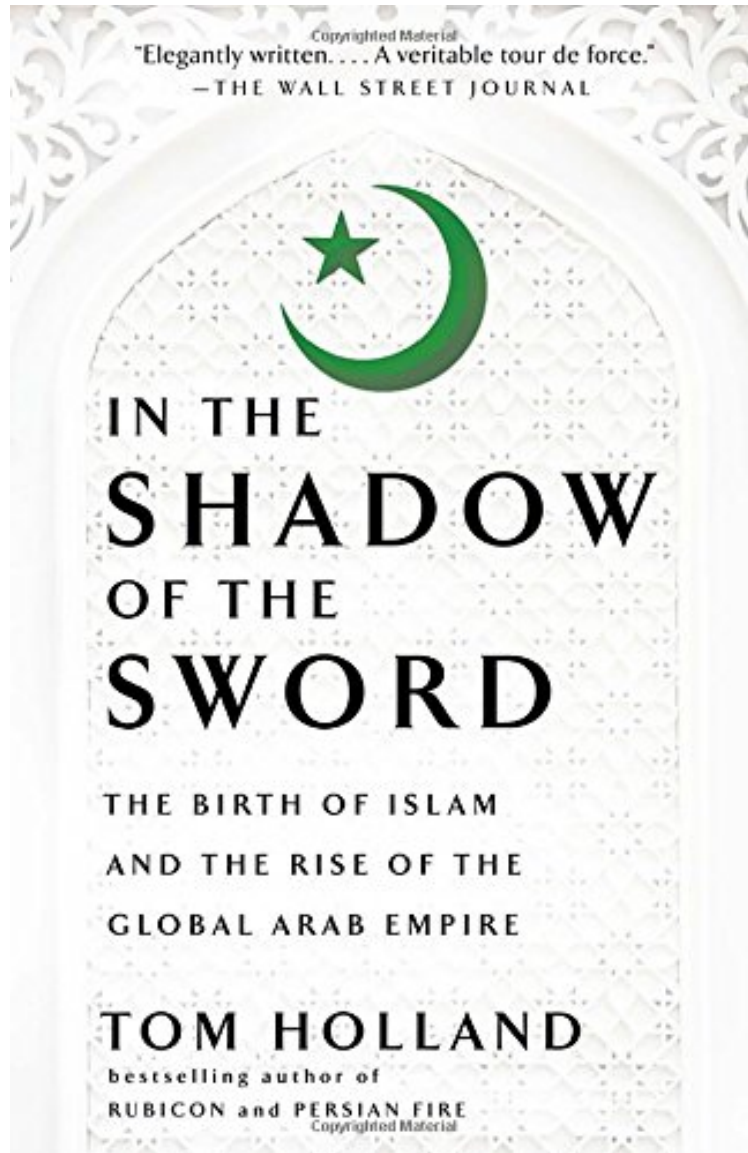


[Online library] In the Shadow of the Sword: The Birth of Islam and the Rise of the Global Arab Empire

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

Tom Holland

*audiobook / *ebooks / Download PDF / ePub / DOC*



[Download](#)

[Read Online](#)

#182243 in Books Tom Holland 2013-02-12 2013-02-12 Original language: English PDF # 1 8.00 x 1.30 x 5.20l, 1.16 #File Name: 0307473651560 pages In the Shadow of the Sword The Birth of Islam and the Rise of the Global Arab Empire | File size: 29.Mb

Tom Holland : In the Shadow of the Sword: The Birth of Islam and the Rise of the Global Arab Empire before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised In the Shadow of the Sword: The Birth of Islam and the Rise of the Global Arab Empire:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy Jae C.nice book. wish more people could read it.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. The books gives detailed information about rivalry between East Roman ...By Serhad BurakanThe books gives detailed information about rivalry between East Roman and Sasanid empires and early days of Islam. Reader can understand the environment which gives birth to Islam.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy bcWonderful book! It is unusual to find a book on Islam that is not shrouded in mythology.

A thrillingly panoramic and incredibly timely account of the rise of Islam, from the acclaimed author of *Rubicon* and *Persian Fire*. The evolution of the Arab empire is one of the supreme narratives of ancient history, a story dazzlingly rich in drama, character, and achievement. In this exciting and sweeping history the third in his trilogy of books on the ancient world Holland describes how the Arabs emerged to carve out a stupefyingly vast dominion in a matter of decades, overcoming seemingly insuperable odds to create an imperial civilization aspects of which endure to the present day. With profound bearing on the most consequential events of our time, Holland ties the exciting story of Islam's ascent to the crises and controversies of the present.

Praise for Tom Holland's *In the Shadow of the Sword* Elegantly written. . . . A veritable tour de force. *The Wall Street Journal* A brilliant tour de force of revisionist scholarship and thrilling storytelling with a bloodspattered cast of swashbuckling tyrants, nymphomaniacal empresses and visionary prophets. The book is unputdownable. . . . An important work based on respected scholarship. It takes courage and intellect to confront such complexity and sensitivity. Written with flamboyant elegance and energetic intensity. *The Times (London)* Accessible but delightful . . . as fun to read as any thriller, and with far richer intellectual nutritional content. . . . Those unwilling to struggle through academic texts have long needed a guide to the story of Islam as its 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. *The Daily Beast* [Holland's] prose is shot through with wit and empathy. The result is a portrait of a lost world that is complex, contradictory and populated by people in thrall to ideas future generations would dismiss as ridiculous. Much like our own, in other words. *Dallas Morning News* [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* sTom Holland is a writer of clarity and expertise, who talks us through this unfamiliar and crowded territory with energy and some dry wit. . . . The 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. *The Spectator (London)* 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. *In the Shadow of the Sword* remains a spell-bindingly brilliant multiple portrait of the triumph of monotheism in the ancient world. *The Independent (London)* This is a handsome volume, tackling an important question from a novel perspective. *Sunday Telegraph (London)* Holland tells a complex story, dotted with names and places leagues beyond the realm of popular recognition. Yet he makes it unmistakably his own. He is one of the most distinctive prose stylists writing history today, and he drags his tale by the ears, conjuring the half-vanished past with such gusto that characters and places fairly bound from the page. *In the Shadow of the Sword* may reach provocative conclusions, but it is also a work of impressive sensitivity and scholarship. *Telegraph (London)* An exhilarating read because Holland succeeds in capturing much of the excitement, strangeness and importance of a long past age. It is difficult not to be bedazzled. *Financial Times (London)* An ambitious and important book. . . . His excellent book will be lauded, as it should be for doing what the best sort of books can do examining holy cows. *The Observer (London)* About the Author Tom Holland is a historian of the ancient world and a translator. His books include *Rubicon: The Triumph and Tragedy of the Roman Republic*, *Persian Fire*, *In the Shadow of the Sword* and *The Forge of Christendom*. He has adapted Homer, Herodotus, Thucydides and Virgil for the BBC. In 2007, he was the winner of the Classical Association prize, awarded to the individual who has done most to promote the study of the language, literature and civilization of Ancient Greece and Rome. He lives in London with his family. Visit the author's website at www.tom-holland.org. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. *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 were not solely of this earth. Radiant though a Caesar might appear to his subjects, awesomely though his palaces and citadels might tower above the common run, and remorselessly though his array of soldiers, and bureaucrats, and tax-collectors might serve his will, yet even he was merely a mortal, in a cosmos governed by a celestial king. There was only one universal monarch--and that was God. This presumption, by the time that Yusuf was brought to bay early in the sixth century ad, was one virtually unchallenged across the entire sweep of the Near East--and it affected almost every aspect of geopolitics in the region. When Yusuf clashed with the Ethiopian invaders, far more was at stake than the petty ambitions of squabbling warlords. The interests of heaven as well had been intimately involved. Between those fighting in the Jewish cause and those in the name of Christ, the differences were so profound as to be irreconcilable. Confident though both sides were that the god they worshipped was the only god--monos theos in Greek--this shared conviction only rendered them all the more implacably opposed. Not just in southern Arabia, but across the entire span of the civilised world, devotion to a particular understanding of the divine had become an emotion that defined the lives of millions upon millions of people. In an age when realms might crest and fall like the spume of a wave, and even great empires totter, there was certainly no earthly power that could command such allegiance. Identity was coming to be defined, not by the kingdoms of this world, but by various conceptions of the One, the Only God: by "monotheisms." This development signalled a transformation of human society with incalculable consequences for the future. Of all the various features of the modern world that can be traced back to antiquity--alphabets, democracy, gladiator films--none, perhaps, has been more globally influential than the establishment, for the first time in history, of various brands of monotheism as state religions. At the start of the third millennium since the birth of Christ, some three and a half billion people--over half the population of the world--identify themselves with one or other of the various religions that assumed something approaching their modern form in the 250 years either side of Yusuf's death. The period of late antiquity, then, unfamiliar though it may be in comparison to other epochs of history, is no less pregnant with relevance for that. Wherever men or women are inspired by a belief in a single god to think or to behave in a certain way, they demonstrate its abiding influence. The impact of the revolution that it witnessed still reverberates today. It is the ambition of this book to trace the origins and the progress of that same revolution. How was it that the patterns of people's thought, over the course of only a few centuries, came to be altered so radically and so enduringly? The story is a richly human one, replete with vivid drama, extraordinary characters and often riotous colour. Yet, it is also one that imposes peculiar demands upon the historian: for much of it takes place in a dimension beyond the physical. It features kings, but also angels; warlords, but also demons. Consequently, not every event in the pages that follow can be explained purely in terms of material self-interest or political calculation. Shadowing the often brutally vivid world of mortal affairs is a dimension that is heaven-lit and damnation-haunted. Certainly, when Yusuf's contemporaries analysed his downfall, they were not nave in their analysis. They recognised that complex issues of trade policy and the rivalries of the two distant superpowers had been lurking in the background. Yet they never doubted that the sands of Arabia had become the stage for an authentically celestial drama. The forces of heaven and hell had met and clashed. It was a matter of opinion whether

Yusuf was on the side of the angels or the demons; but neither Jews nor Christians had any doubt that what had happened had derived ultimately from God. This was the core presumption of the age; and a history of late antiquity that neglects to pay due acknowledgement to it is a history that has failed. The beliefs of the period must therefore be treated with both seriousness and empathy. Yet this does not mean that their claims should be taken wholly at face value. Back in the early fourth century, a Palestinian bishop by the name of Eusebius wrote a history of the early Church. In it, he initiated a tradition of historical enquiry that explained the past as the tracing of patterns upon time by the forefinger of God. This presumption, although stupendously influential, and not merely among Christian authors, fell out of fashion in the West several centuries ago. Whatever their personal religious convictions may be, modern historians do not generally explain past events as the workings of divine providence. All aspects of human society--even beliefs themselves--are now presumed to be products of evolution. Nor is this a uniquely modern perspective. Eusebius himself, fifteen hundred years before Darwin, had recognised in it a pernicious and peculiarly threatening heresy. Nothing was more alarming to him than the notion propagated by the enemies of his faith that it was something upstart and contingent, a mere distorted echo of more venerable traditions. His history, far from tracing changes in the doctrines and institutions of the Church, aimed to demonstrate that they had never changed in the slightest. And Christianity itself? Christianity, Eusebius presumed, had existed since the dawn of time: "For, obviously, we must regard the religion proclaimed in recent years to every nation through Christ's teaching as none other than the first, the most ancient, and the most primitive of religions."⁶¹ From a letter of Simeon of Beth Arsham, discovered and quoted by Shahid (1971), p. 47.² Ibid., p. 57.³ *Chronicon ad Annum Christi 1234 Pertinens*: 1.237.⁴ From a poem written in the Hijaz, the region of Arabia where Mecca is situated: quoted by Hoyland (2001), p. 69.⁵ Theophylact Simocatta: 4.2.2.6 Eusebius: *History of the Church*, 1.4.10.