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Book Review: Harry Sidebottom, King of Kings

Citation for published version:

Kelly, G 2009, 'Book Review: Harry Sidebottom, King of Kings' *Tls-The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 5549, pp. 25-25.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Tls-The Times Literary Supplement

Publisher Rights Statement:

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Harry Sidebottom

WARRIOR OF ROME: PART TWO. KING OF KINGS

King of Kings is the second volume in a trilogy of military-historical novels set in the mid-third century AD Roman empire. Few people know as much about this shadowy period of Roman history as Harry Sidebottom: the title page credits him with his doctorate, and there are over twenty pages of historical apparatus, with suggestions for further reading and a glossary. Such academic material may seem jarring in this rollocking page-turner. In fact, the author's learning, though lightly worn, combines with his narrative skills to produce a superior example of genre fiction, with unusual depth, authenticity, and sense of place.

The lack of known names and dates in the period gives plenty of scope for the historian's and novelist's imagination; the first volume, *Fire in the East* (2008), focused on the fictional Persian siege of a fictional Roman city in AD 256, modelled on the siege of Amida a century later. The present tale is woven around a military campaign of 257, contemporary persecutions of Christians, and the capture of the emperor Valerian by Shapur I of Persia in 260. This division into three separate narratives means that this story is perhaps not quite as consistently successful as the previous volume (which should certainly be read first); but the climax is very well done.

Sidebottom captures the group psychology of soldiers, and he is good on the peculiar role of 'barbarian' soldiers in the Roman army. His hero, Ballista, is an Angle (his chief sidekicks are a large-hearted Irishman and a grumpy Caledonian). Although he has as much culture, and greater linguistic ability and strategic intelligence, than Roman colleagues, Ballista is seen as suspect and is expendable when the chips are down. Having the Romans viewed through the eyes of semi-outsiders also helps the novelist to avoid didacticism. The text offers a number of hints as to Ballista's future career, and in the next volume he will merge with the little that's known of the historical Ballista.