



## The Amber Road

*Harry Sidebottom*

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## **The Amber Road** Harry Sidebottom

In the sixth novel in Harry Sidebottom's acclaimed and bestselling Warrior of Rome historical fiction series, Ballista returns to undertake yet another epic mission—while the Roman Empire reels in chaos around him. In AD 264, the Roman Empire has been torn in two. The western provinces—Gaul, Spain and Britain—have been seized by Postumus, the pretender to the throne. To the east, on the plains of northern Italy, the armies of the emperor Gallienus muster and he is keen to take his rightful place of power. A war between two emperors is coming and everyone must choose a side.

On a mission shrouded in secrecy and suspicion, Ballista is sent by Gallienus back to his original home of Hyperborea, the place of the people of his birth to raise an army against Postumus. This means that Ballista must journey along The Amber Road to the far north. Along the way Ballista meets a fearsome, masked warlord who attacks, bringing fire and sword against Ballista and his men. And in his home of Hyperborea not all welcome Ballista's return. In the battle between Postumus and Gallienus only one can survive and be emperor.

Renowned for their skilled blending of action and historical accuracy, Sidebottom's Warrior of Rome novels take the reader from the shouts of the battlefield to the whisperings of the emperor's inner circle. Rich in detail and punctuated by harrowing action, there's no better way to transport yourself back to the days of the Roman Empire.

## **The Amber Road Details**

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Author : Harry Sidebottom

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## From Reader Review The Amber Road for online ebook

### Keith Currie says

Ballista returns home (after a long and adventurous journey) to Angle-Land where as Prince Dernhelm he becomes involved in the nefarious plots of his wicked half-brother, Morcar, and his minions. There is also a mysterious masked warlord who is attempting to destroy the empire of Ballista's father, Isangrim.

This is probably my favourite of the Ballista series, although I'm not entirely sure why, as it does not differ very much from any of the others. There are lots of battles, individual fights, sieges, tense chases in rowing boats on rivers and on the sea, and lots and lots of curses and cursing.

Perhaps the plot held together better than some of the others; perhaps there actually was a plot. Perhaps it was the slightly more concise length of the novel or its more compressed, even terse, writing style, especially in the scenes involving emperor Gallienus and his Gallic rival, Postumus. It might even have been the occasional good joke, such as the centurion Diocles considering how best the empire might be governed and being offered the system he later implemented as emperor Diocletian; or it may have been Diocles' fondness for cabbages (a nice clue!).

Or it may simply have been the ending, involving the odious Greek courtier Zeno and the wonderful fate that is worked out for him in the court of Ballista's half-brother, Oslac. Read to the end: it's worth it.

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### Amy says

Only up to page 47 but not at all captured or interested in going on with it.

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### Ruth says

c2013: FWFTB: Gaul, war, Hyperborea, treachery, Ballista. For some strange reason, I was not as enamoured with this book as I was with my first Ballista read. Perhaps, it was so similar in plot and form that it all became a bit samey. Recommended for those of the crew that enjoy the Romans!

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### Jan says

After two disappointing books, Amber Road is in many ways a return to form for Harry Sidebottom, similar to Ballista return to his homeland.

While I am not a big fan of the beginning of the book (I think the two prologues appear nearly off-topic until you're quite far into the book, by which time you've pretty much forgotten half of them), but it becomes increasingly better and is probably as good as the earlier books in the series in the second half.

Although I wasn't convinced of Sidebottom describing events from multiple angles initially, it actually is a

very good literary mechanism and works quite well. Whether it is Zeno's own belief of bravery (blatantly untrue) or Maximus' blunt assessment of a situation, it is quite entertaining.

In particular, the rowing scene is great: "Reach, stroke, pause and twist the blade free" shows the rhythm of Maximus' rowing very well, followed by his annoyance about Ballista not rowing (but talking to the guide).

On the other hand, Sidebottom is starting to run into a fragmentation of characters - following Gallienus and Postumus (the two emperors at war) in their own chapters feels unnecessary, as they should not be elevated to main characters. This very much reminds me of George R R Martin's storytelling demise...

But all of this is forgotten in the send half of the book, when we follow Ballista to the Angles, on a mission to his father Isangrim. We get treated to a back story about his youthful love Kadlin, her current husband (and his brother) Oslac and the rather devious brother Morcar.

Compared to the last two books, the stokes feel deeper and richer, drawing us in...and combined with a well-paced war against the Amber Lord (Unferth) that has Ballista and his familia conducting heroics once again.

Overall, this si worth 4 stars - though I would give the second half 5 stars!

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### **Audrey Cornelison says**

Please don't let this be the last one!!!!!! Way too much left unresolved, plus, I just love Ballista. He needs to defeat that curse and get his life back. Pretty please!!!!

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### **Marcus Pailing says**

Couldn't decide whether to give it 3 or 4, and decided in the end to give it 3. I did enjoy it - and it's a huge improvement on "Wolves of the North". But there were still things that niggled somewhat. Could have done with Ballista getting to his homeland more quickly, and then having more story development once he was there. There were conflicts that could have been much more developed. On the other hand, it's all part of a meta-narrative, which is one of the things I like about these books - you do really have to visualise the wider context and see Ballista's story as being but a part of it.

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### **Jean-luc says**

Slow start in this one as the POV shifts from one protagonist to the other but gets underway nicely by the middle of the book. Can't wait for the next installment (I hope).

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### **Jack says**

And so it comes to and end - the sixth and 'final' book of Ballista, warrior of Rome.

SPOILER ALERT - the author does say he has another trilogy in the works but its a few years off.

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Great character development - believable plots - a wonderful tip through 3rd century northern Europe.

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### **happy says**

In this sixth entry into Prof Sidebottom's Warrior of Rome series, Ballista is again on a journey outside the borders of the Empire. This time he is going home. Set against the reconquest of the breakaway Gallic Empire, Ballista is being sent to what is now Denmark to separate his native tribe, the Angles, from the Gallic Empire and arrange an alliance with the rightful emperor, Gallienus.

For those familiar with the previous books of the series – this is more of the same, excellent battle scenes, political intrigue, vivid descriptions of the trek outside the borders of the Empire – this time to the Barbarian lands bordering the Baltic Sea, and a bit of a love triangle. As always Prof Sidebottom's story is strongly based in what is known and extremely well researched. What he has invented is seems entirely plausible. In telling the story of the Angles, Prof Sidebottom makes there culture very similar to the later (by 600 yrs) culture of the Vikings.

He opens the novel in a scene reminiscent of the first novel in the series. Ballista takes on the hopeless defense of a city. This time the city is on the Black Sea outside the borders of the Empire. It is being attacked by raiding proto-Vikings in long ships. The sequence is well done and for me one of the highlight of the novel

In writing the main story of the novel, the author not only follows Ballista and company, but also tells the story of the two emperors – the rebel Posthumus and Gallienus and there preparations for war. In some ways I thought this distracted from the main story line, but it also put in context.

While I found the story well told, the ending seemed rather abrupt to me. This series begs for at least one more novel, but it seems that the good professor is taking some time off and starting another series. I really hope this is not the end of the series and he comes back to it in the future.

Because of the ending, I would rate this 3.75 stars rounded up for good reads

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### **Drayton Bird says**

I read about four books a week, but few stay with me. This writer has really captured me.

Gore galore - and a lot more.

Perfect if you love history, blood and guts, a goodly dollop of rape and pillage, a heroic hero - plus lots of detail about ancient war.

This was the last in this writer's Warrior of Rome series. The covers - and one of the reviews - suggest they are for people who like "Gladiator", but they are infinitely more sophisticated.

The period and places he has carefully chosen are ones few people know much about - or knew about at the time. Utter chaos.

I have now read all the author's novels. They get better and better.

I doubt if any writer of fiction knows more about what a Roman army and late Roman politics were really like - treachery, suspicion, lies and downright lunacy abound. He is a real scholar with a gift for narrative.

I was constantly referring to the internet to learn about places and people featured (many if not most of the lesser characters were real people).

I also found myself comparing the story with what I have been reading in Gibbon's Decline and Fall - which is far easier to read and often funnier than you might think.

Really recommend; I have become an addict; a bit like discovering Tolkien.

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### **Mary says**

Last summer when I reviewed "The Wolves of the North", I expressed my fear that death stalked one of my favorite literary characters (who was also a real historical figure), Marcus Claudius Ballista, and I was afraid to read Book 6 in Sidebottom's "Warrior of Rome" series because I would find it hard to say goodbye to Ballista after accompanying him on so many adventures in Persia and beyond. However, a friend on Facebook assured me that, even though trusty old Calgicus died as a result of his wounds from the traitorous Greek in Ballista's familia in Book Five, Ballista would not die in book six, "The Amber Road".

So, I once more got to accompany Ballista on yet another action-filled adventure, this time to his homeland on the shores of the Suebian Sea now commonly known as the Baltic Sea. Along the way I met such fierce warriors as the Brondings (thought to originate from the Swedish island of Brännö), the Dauciones (from Scandinavia), the Geats (from Götaland in modern Sweden), the Greuthungi (possibly the Ostrogoths in later years), the Harii (who, according to Tacitus, painted themselves and their shield black and preferred to attack at night bringing terror to their opponents), and a lone Vandal who joins Ballista's hearth troupe and regales the familia with impromptu epics exalting Ballista's exploits.

This time the Emperor Gallienus has commissioned Ballista to bring the northern tribes back into the Imperial fold after they have been coerced into the service of the western pretender, Postumus.

Marcus Cassianius Latinius Postumus was a Roman commander of possibly Batavian origin (some of his coinage honors Hercules Duesoniensis, with the suffix said to refer to the Batavian town of Deuso). Postumus rose through the ranks and may have been promoted to imperial legate of Lower Germany by the emperor Valerian. When news of Valerian's capture by the Persians reach the army in Gaul, who were battling an invasion of Alemanni and Franks, the army revolts and proclaims Postumus emperor even though Valerian's son, heir and emperor of the west, Gallienus, is still very much alive.

Note: This revolt in 260 CE resulted in the Roman Empire's loss of control over Britain, Spain, parts of Germania and a large part of Gaul and these lands would later become known as the Gallic Empire. The exact date of the revolt was uncertain for some time until an inscription was discovered in Augsburg in 1992 stating that Postumus was proclaimed Emperor in September of 260 CE. The Gallic Empire remained

independent until 274 CE.

But Gallienus has his hands full putting down insurrections along the Danubian frontier and trying to re-exert control in the east. (The loss of Valerian and the disposition of the succession of usurpers that followed are the foundation of the narrative in *Lion of the Sun, Warrior of Rome 3.*)

However, when Postumus and Marcus Simplicinius Genialis crush the Juthungi and Gallienus' 18-year-old son, Saloninus, demands the spoils for his father instead of their distribution to the troops (probably at the behest of his praetorian prefect Silvanus), the troops are enraged. So, Postumus ignores the junior caesar and distributes the spoils anyway.

Aware they have stirred up a hornet's nest, Saloninus and Silvanus flee to *Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippinensis* (Cologne) with a small group of loyal supporters. Postumus' Gauls then besiege Cologne and upon breaching the walls of the city capture and behead Silvanus and Saloninus. (In the novel, Sidebottom has Postumus regretfully thinking back on his order to have young Saloninus beheaded as he has heard rumors he is now considered a child killer. There seems to be some disagreement among scholars on this point as some of the ancient sources appear to blame the Gauls for the murder and do not attribute it to a direct order from Postumus.)

Needless to say, this immediately gets Gallienus' attention and he begins to gather forces to confront Postumus. As only parts of Germania fell under the sway of Postumus, it would have been logical for Gallienus to send an embassy like the one led by Ballista to try to bolster imperial support in the northern provinces. Remember, however, that the historical Ballista disappeared from the records after defeating the Persians, overthrowing Quietus and being acclaimed emperor himself in the east. So Ballista's adventures detailed in this installment are fictional.

As Ballista's troupe make their way to the northern coast of the Euxine (Black) Sea, they are constantly threatened, first by Goths who have sworn a blood oath to revenge the death of one of their leaders killed by Ballista and his men through trickery while defending Miletus (in an earlier book). The troupe fights its way to the ancient Greek colony of Olbia just in time for Ballista to command the defense of the city against the Goths.

Olbia, like the crumbling Roman Empire in the third century CE, was a shadow of its former self. It was initially founded in the 7th century BCE by Greek colonists from Miletus who constructed a harbor for the export of cereals, fish and slaves to Greece and the import of Attic goods to Scythia. It was even visited by Herodotus in the 5th century BCE and was important commercially for centuries until it was sacked by the Getae under Burebista in the 1st century CE.

I can't read about Olbia without thinking about the magnificent golden jewelry, dubbed the Olbia Treasure, I photographed at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore. It was actually discovered by peasants in a female burial tomb at Parutino near Olbia in 1891.

Anyway, Ballista successfully defends the citadel once again through courage and shrewd strategy. Sidebottom once more displays his extensive scholar's grasp of siege warfare and tactics originally showcased in his first book of the series "*Fire In The East, Warrior of Rome Book 1*".

Although Ballista was successful in the novel, sadly Olbia was eventually abandoned in the 4th century CE after it was burned at least twice in the Gothic wars.

Supplied with additional men, Ballista continues north up the Hypanis River where the embassy is eventually attacked by the Brondings, originating from the area of modern day Sweden. In the novel, a mysterious warrior named Unferth has killed the Brondings king and taken over the tribe. Together with his son, Unferth, commanding huge longships, has pillaged many of the surrounding villages.

When I was researching this review, I checked to see if Unferth was an historical figure and I discovered he was a Danish lord in the ancient German epic Beowulf. Unferth taunts Beowulf, claiming he could not have possibly done some of the epic deeds he claims. Beowulf replies that Unferth is known for nothing except killing his kin. The Unferth in Sidebottom's novel is definitely doing that so I thought it was an appropriate character for the antagonist in the story.

Of course, there is actually more than one antagonist in this story as Ballista discovers his half brother Morcar (I hope I've spelled the names right because I listen to the unabridged audio version of the novel while I exercise) is engaged in a number of intrigues to ensure he will become the "sinning" (leader of the Angles) upon his father's death. Ballista's childhood sweetheart also has a secret of her own that will probably feature in a future installment of the series if Dr. Sidebottom chooses to continue the series (He's now pretty wrapped up in a new series "Throne of the Caesars" sort of a prequel to the "Warrior of Rome" series.)

Once again Sidebottom has delivered a gritty, action-packed tale founded in carefully researched history of the third century CE. Best of all, from my perspective, Ballista, an admirable literary hero I have enjoyed reading about through six novels, lives to fight yet another day!

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### **Jim Downie says**

Couldn't finish it as no matter how much I tried. I am interested in the content but wasn't drawn in by the text. Eventually gave up.

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### **Tomasz says**

Bez Beowulfa prawdopodobnie nie by?oby W?adcy Pier?cieni. Gdyby Profesor nie inspirowa? si? staroangielsk? epik? bohateresk?, nie by?oby Aragorna, dzielnych krasnoludów, smoka do ubicia i Wielkiego Z?a Na Wschodzie. Nie, wró?! Dzi?ki Stalinowi Tolkien mo?e by i wpad? na pomys? Wielkiego Z?a na Wschodzie, ale na tym tyle.

I nieco podobna sytuacja ma si? z szóstym, ostatnim tomem cyklu Sidebottoma Wojownik Rzymu. Jak wyk?adowca historii w Lincoln College i jeden z ciekawzych twórców wspó?czesnej prozy historycznej ukoronowa? histori? barbarzy?skiego ?o?nierza w s?u?bie Rzymu? Po przeczytaniu powie?ci mia?em mieszane odczucia. Wydawa?o si?, ?e Bursztynowy szlak nie dorównuje Wilkom Pó?nocy, jednak po kilku dniach emocje si? uporz?dkowa?y a wnioski, które si? pojawi?y by?y du?o bardziej pozytywne. Przede wszystkim to bardzo przemy?lana powie?? i konsekwentne, zgodne z konwencj? serii zako?czenie opowie?ci.

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### **Ian Langham says**

My review gives 5 stars for the series (so far)..Doctor Sidebottom brings the chaotic period of the 3rd century to life with the stroke of a pen. Over the six books the main characters battle siege, betrayal, slavery, murder and everything else a barbarian general in Rome's 3rd century armies can expect and more.

As the Author is a scholar of the time. It is laced with people who existed from the great and good to the not so great or good. Looking forward to book 7 and the Throne Of The Ceasers is another great series by this writer. That is set just before this one and could be viewed as forerunner of the Warrior Of Rome series. This series concentrates on the above mentioned General and his immediate family group or familia. Given missions over the series to hold cities against rampaging barbarian hordes, blood feuds, given the choice to become emperor and other such minor concerns.

But only complaint I have is that book 6 does finish rather vaguely, as too many loose ends left untied. Or is that the greater plan for book 7?

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### **Laurence Baldwin says**

Great read! I do feel sorry for poor old Ballista and hope he has a happy retirement, but somehow I suspect that the ambiguous ending opens up room for further sequels...

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