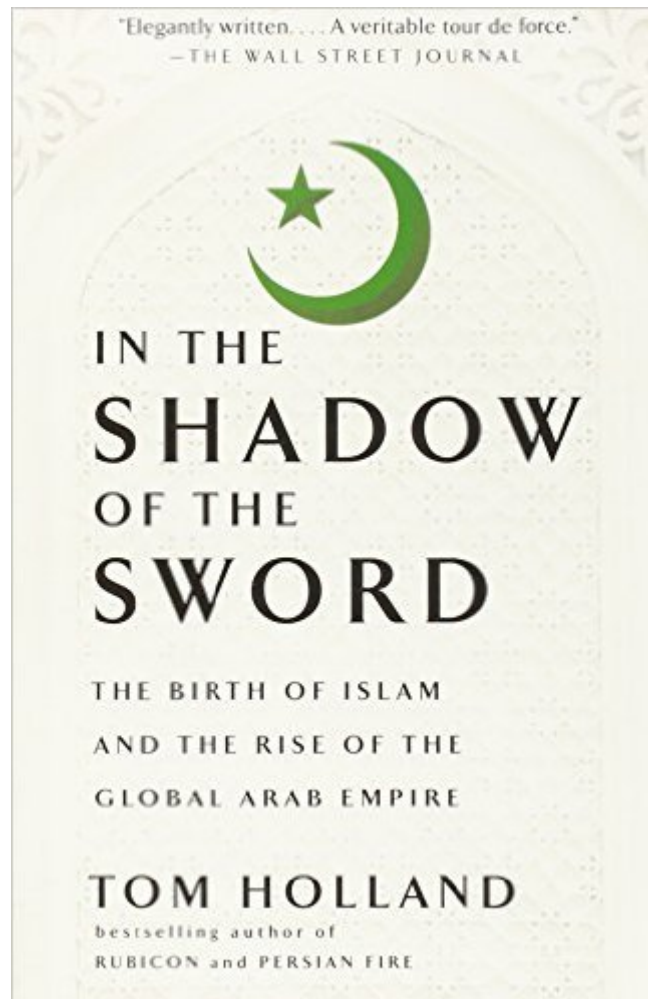


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In The Shadow Of The Sword: The Birth Of Islam And The Rise Of The Global Arab Empire



Synopsis

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.

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Customer Reviews

The reviews that precede me are thorough and point out both the strengths and weaknesses of *The Shadow of the Sword*. I am largely in agreement with their comments. I *do*, however, disagree with the claim that this is poorly written. To the contrary, the writing is elegant and flows rapidly: in the parts of the history that I was acquainted with, I could consume whole pages in seconds. The problem arises precisely from Holland's fluent prose: as he reconstructs events, his eloquent descriptions can deceive the reader into taking his formulations literally, rather than being what they are—literary reconstructions. It reminded me of a newspaper: if it misrepresents the facts that I *know* about, how can I trust those assertions that I do *not* have personal knowledge about? I want to be clear: I am not accusing Mr. Holland of historical errors. The problem is that he writes so well that the reader can be tempted to take his descriptions at face value. Here's an example,

literally at random (Kindle Loc 3333): "In 527, five years before work began on Hagia Sophia, a small boy named Simeon had trotted through the bazaars and shanty-towns of Antioch, out through the olive groves that stretched southwards of the city, and up the slopes of a nearby mountain. Its rugged heights were no place for a child, nor for anyone with a care for comfort." There are 3 facts in those sentences: that Simeon became a stylite in 527, he was a child at the time, and that he came from Antioch. Everything else is in Holland's very vivid imagination. Much in this work I already knew about: the Jewish and Christian history, and the contemporary skeptical reconstructions of Islamic origins and history. Unfortunately, when he poses the crucial questions about Islamic origins (ch.

The book aims to explain Late Antiquity up to 600 AD, and to show how Islam developed from that up to 800 AD. Historians have much better records for Late Antiquity than they have for the first century of Islam - as this book notes and as many other historians have noted (and lamented). The bulk of the book amounts to an introductory overview; the origins of Islam takes up only the last third of it and this part reads more like an argumentary essay. The prose is florid, yet interspersed with vulgarities. Holland is inordinately fond of the low, cant term "screwed" when discussing... tax extraction. This style felt to me like he was trying too hard to keep my interest. (He's much like Peter Heather here.) Fortunately the book has marshaled an impressive array of facts behind its narrative. I was impressed that it had stayed so close to the cutting edge, especially in the Persia / Parthia sections. Much of that recent material distills Parvaneh Pourshariati, "Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire"; that book came out in 2008. The reader must be warned here that Holland does not challenge Pourshariati where Pourshariati relies on mediaeval Iranian legend. For instance, Holland tells of Sukhrāf of the Parthian house Karin as avenger of the shah Peroz (pp. 83-5). Holland has this from Pourshariati `an Tabari (p. 455 nn. 47-49, 51). This is an in-house legend of the Karin and not history: Arthur Christensen, "Iran sous les Sassanides" (Copenhagen: 1944), p. 296. (Hat-tip to the review by Geoffery Greatrex, 1010.) Where the book touches Islam, it is careful to contrast classical jargon against the way people (including Arabs) thought during the 600s.

If you didn't know the author, the title of this book and its cover illustration - a fallen helmet with vacant staring eye-sockets lying in the desert sand - give the impression of an epic historical novel. Distribution too; I bought a soft cover "airport edition" - a channel better known for promoting the latest books by best-selling authors. Although in its style and structure it reads like a novel - somewhat florid prose, and dramatic interruptions in the narrative to allow the reader to catch up on

another part of the plot - anyone who buys the book under this expectation will soon realize that what they actually have is a hardcore history book. It is essentially an attempt to present a historical account of Mohammed and the early history of Islam, as opposed to the idealized version subsequently enshrined in the religion that was founded in the name of the prophet. In order to achieve this, the author traces the development of the three major religions of antiquity - Christianity, Judaism and the Zoroastrianism of the Sassanian Persian empire. This forms the essential context for explaining the rapid spread of Islam on the back of the Arab conquest of the ancient east early in the seventh century. He describes how some form of monotheism was by this time already pervasive in most of what we call the middle east. And this did not exclude the Arabs; thousands had moved north, where they could make a profitable living, policing the borders of both Byzantine and Sassanian empires as mercenaries, and where at the same time they were likely to have been influenced by the winds of monotheism.

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