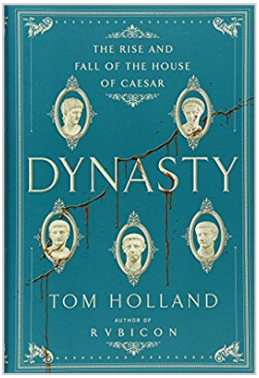

Dynasty: The Rise and Fall of the House of Caesar

By Tom Holland

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Author and historian Tom Holland returns to his roots in Roman history and the audience he cultivated with *Rubicon*—his masterful, witty, brilliantly researched popular history of the fall of the Roman republic—with *Dynasty*, a luridly fascinating history of the reign of the first five Roman emperors.

Dynasty continues *Rubicon*'s story, opening where that book ended: with the murder of Julius Caesar. This is the period of the first and perhaps greatest Roman Emperors and it's a colorful story of rule and ruination, running from the rise of Augustus through to the death of Nero. Holland's expansive history also has distinct shades of *I Claudius*, with five wonderfully vivid (and in three cases, thoroughly depraved) Emperors—Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero—featured, along with numerous fascinating secondary characters. Intrigue, murder, naked ambition and treachery, greed, gluttony, lust, incest, pageantry, decadence—the tale of these five Caesars continues to cast a mesmerizing spell across the millennia.

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Dynasty: The Rise and Fall of the House of Caesar By Tom Holland Bibliography

- Rank: #275470 in Books
- Brand: Tom Holland
- Published on: 2015-10-20
- Released on: 2015-10-20
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.56" h x 1.55" w x 6.39" l, 1.50 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 512 pages

Editorial Review

Review
Praise for *Dynasty*:

"...With his new book, *Dynasty*, the British historian Tom Holland has crafted a history of early Rome that has all the gripping detail and narrative momentum of a novel. Mr. Holland does not gloss over the holes or uncertainties in his story, but instead uses his knowledge of the period (which starts with the murder of Julius Caesar and concludes with Nero's suicide in A.D. 68) to place early and sometimes disputed accounts in context, and to give the reader a startlingly visceral sense of the violence and brutality and wretched excess of ancient Rome.
—Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

"This is great material, and Holland does it justice with a chiseled prose style and an eye for the luminous detail.... A graduate of both Cambridge and Oxford, Holland is a master of narrative history. On the strength of *Dynasty*, he deserves a laurel wreath."
—Dennis Drabelle, *Washington Post*

"Holland, a classical scholar turned full-time author, has written highly regarded accounts of Roman, Greek, medieval European and early Islamic history and has also translated...the sweeping narrative of Herodotus out of ancient Greek. The canvas of *Dynasty* is his broadest yet, both in terms of time (he begins well before the Julio-Claudians, to show how they arose) and territory. He keeps his eyes trained on the men and women of the August Family even while following events as widely dispersed as Britain, Germany and North Africa. His ability to operate at small and large scale simultaneously—both *domi* and *fores*, in Rome and abroad, as Tacitus put it—is one of his great talents.... *Dynasty* surely secures his place among the foremost writers of popular history practicing today."
—James Romm, *Wall Street Journal*

"Holland's novelistic approach enhances a story that he has not invented. This means that his account is gripping and occasionally eloquent, but sometimes the larger historical setting vanishes as he concentrates on vivid personalities at the expense of the vast empire within which all the domestic horrors were taking place."
—G.W. Bowersock, *New York Review of Books*

"As for the book I read before I turn the light out, currently it's *Dynasty*, by Tom Holland, about the Caesars. It has Holland's usual novelistic ability to bring a narrative alive, together with his extraordinary command of ancient sources. It's the sequel to his outstanding *Rubicon*. It's fascinating on how, inch by inch, Augustus and his successors surreptitiously turned a republic into an autocracy."
—Matt Ridley, *New York Times Book Review*, "By the Book"

"Among the many virtues of Tom Holland's terrific history is that he does not shrink from seeing the Roman emperors for what they were: 'the west's primal examples of tyranny'. He accepts that tales of their paranoid depravity make historians uneasy.... He knits the history of ancient Rome into his narrative—its founding myths, the fall of the republic, the religious superstitions—with a skill so dextrous you don't notice the stitching. *Dynasty* is both a formidable effort to compile what we can know about the ancient world and a sensational story."
—Nick Cohen, *The Guardian*

"A vivid account of five Roman emperors, emphasizing their vices and vicious behavior with less attention to the vast empire, which continued to prosper despite them."
—Kirkus Reviews

About the Author
TOM HOLLAND is the author of numerous history books, including *Rubicon*, *Persian Fire*, and *The Histories*, a new translation of Herodotus. He wrote and presented *Islam: The Untold Story*, a documentary commissioned for Channel 4 in Britain based on his book *In the Shadow of the Sword*. He lives in London with his wife and two daughters

AD 40. It is early in the year. Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus sits on a lofty platform beside the Ocean. As waves break on the shore and spray hangs in the air, he gazes out to sea. Many Roman ships over the years have been lost to its depths. Strange monsters are rumoured to lurk in its grey waters, while beyond the horizon there lies an island teeming with savage and mustachioed head-hunters: Britain. Perils such as these, lurking as they do on the very margins of civilisation, are fit to challenge even the boldest and most iron-willed hero.

The story of the Roman people, though, has always had about it an aura of the epic. They have emerged from dim and provincial obscurity to the command of the world: a feat like no other in history. Repeatedly put to trial, repeatedly surviving it triumphant, Rome has been well steeled for global rule. Now, seven hundred and ninety-two years after her founding, the man who ranks as her emperor wields power worthy of a god. Lined up alongside him on the northern beach are rank upon rank of the most formidable fighting force on the planet: armour-clad legionaries, catapults, battlefield artillery. The Emperor Gaius scans their length. He gives a command. At once, there is a blaring of trumpets. The signal for battle. Then silence. The Emperor raises his voice. 'Soldiers!' he cries. 'I command you to pick up shells. Fill your helmets with the spoils of the Ocean.' And the legionaries, obedient to their emperor's order, do so.

Such, at any rate, is the story. But is it true? Did the soldiers really pick up shells? And if they did – why? The episode is one of the most notorious in the life of a man whose entire career remains to this day a thing of infamy. Caligula, the name by which the Emperor Gaius is better known, is one of the few people from ancient history to be as familiar to pornographers as to classicists. The scandalous details of his reign have always provoked prurient fascination. 'But enough of the emperor; now to the monster.' So wrote Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, a scholar and archivist in the imperial palace who doubled in his spare time as a biographer of the Caesars, and whose life of Caligula is the oldest extant one that we possess. Written almost a century after the Emperor's death, it catalogues a quite sensational array of depravities and crimes. He slept with his sisters! He dressed up as the goddess Venus! He planned to award his horse the highest magistracy in Rome! Set against the background of such stunts, Caligula's behaviour on the Channel coast comes to seem a good deal less surprising. Suetonius certainly had no problem in explaining his behaviour. 'He was ill in both body and mind.'

But if Caligula was sick, then so too was Rome. The powers of life and death wielded by an emperor would have been abhorrent to an earlier generation. Almost a century before Caligula massed his legions on the shores of the Ocean and gazed out to Britain, his great-great-great-great-uncle had done the same – and then actually crossed the Channel. The exploits of Gaius Julius Caesar had been as spectacular as any in his city's history: not only two invasions of Britain but the permanent annexation of Gaul, as the Romans called what today is France. He had achieved his feats, though, as a citizen of a republic – one in which it was taken for granted by most that death was the only conceivable alternative to liberty. When Julius Caesar, trampling down this presumption, had laid claim to a primacy over his fellow citizens, it had resulted first in civil war, and then, after he had crushed his domestic foes as he had previously crushed the Gauls, in his assassination.

Only after two more murderous bouts of slaughtering one another had the Roman people finally been inured to their servitude. Submission to the rule of a single man had redeemed their city and its empire from self-destruction – but the cure itself had been a kind of sickness.

Augustus, their new master had called himself, 'The Divinely Favoured One'. The great-nephew of Julius Caesar, he had waded through blood to secure the command of Rome and her empire – and then, his rivals once dispatched, had coolly posed as a prince of peace. As cunning as he was ruthless, as patient as he was decisive, Augustus had managed to maintain his supremacy for decades, and then to die in his bed. Key to this achievement had been his ability to rule with rather than against the grain of Roman tradition: for by pretending that he was not an autocrat, he had licensed his fellow citizens to pretend that they were still free. A veil of shimmering and seductive subtlety had been draped over the brute contours of his dominance. Time, though, had seen this veil become increasingly threadbare. On Augustus's death in AD 14, the powers that he had accumulated over the course of his long and mendacious career stood revealed, not as temporary expediencies, but rather as a package to be handed down to an heir. His choice of successor had been a man raised since childhood in his own household, an aristocrat by the name of Tiberius. The many qualities of the new Caesar, which ranged from exemplary aristocratic pedigree to a track record as Rome's finest general, had counted for less than his status as Augustus's adopted son – and everyone had known it.

Tiberius, a man who all his life had been wedded to the virtues of the vanished Republic, had made an unhappy monarch; but Caligula, who had succeeded him in turn after a reign of twenty-three years, was unembarrassed. That he ruled the Roman world by virtue neither of age nor of experience, but as the great-grandson of Augustus, bothered him not the slightest. 'Nature produced him, in my opinion, to demonstrate just how far unlimited vice can go when combined with unlimited power.' Such was the obituary delivered on him by Seneca, a philosopher who had known him well. The judgement, though, was not just on Caligula, but on Seneca's own peers, who had cringed and grovelled before the Emperor while he was still alive, and on the Roman people as a whole. The age was a rotten one: diseased, debased, degraded.

Or so many believed. Not everyone agreed. The regime established by Augustus would never have endured had it failed to offer what the Roman people had come so desperately to crave after decades of civil war: peace and order. The vast agglomeration of provinces ruled from Rome, which stretched from the North Sea to the Sahara, and from the Atlantic to the Fertile Crescent, reaped the benefits as well. Three centuries on, when the nativity of the most celebrated man to have been born in Augustus's reign stood in infinitely clearer focus than it had done at the time, a bishop named Eusebius could see in the Emperor's achievements the very guiding hand of God. 'It was not just as a consequence of human action,' he declared, 'that the greater part of the world should have come under Roman rule at the precise moment Jesus was born. The coincidence that saw our Saviour begin his mission against such a backdrop was undeniably arranged by divine agency. After all – had the world still been at war, and not united under a single form of government, then how much more difficult would it have been for the disciples to undertake their travels.'

Eusebius could see, with the perspective provided by distance, just how startling was the feat of globalisation brought to fulfilment under Augustus and his successors. Brutal though the methods deployed to uphold it were, the sheer immensity of the regions pacified by Roman arms was unprecedented. 'To accept a gift,' went an ancient saying, 'is to sell your liberty.' Rome held her conquests in fee; but the peace that she bestowed upon them in exchange was not necessarily to be sniffed at. Whether in the suburbs of the capital itself, booming under the Caesars to become the largest city the world had ever seen, or across the span of the Mediterranean, united now for the first time under a single power, or in the furthermost corners of an empire whose global reach was without precedent, the *pax Romana* brought benefits to millions. Provincials might well be grateful. 'He cleared the sea of pirates, and filled it with merchant shipping.' So a Jew from the great Egyptian metropolis of Alexandria, writing in praise of Augustus, enthused. 'He gave freedom to every city,

brought order where there had been chaos, and civilised savage peoples.'Similar hymns of praise could be – and were – addressed to Tiberius and Caligula. The depravities for which both men would end up notorious rarely had much impact on the world at large. It mattered little in the provinces who ruled as emperor – just so long as the centre held.

Nevertheless, even in the furthest reaches of the Empire, Caesar was a constant presence. How could he not be? 'In the whole wide world, there is not a single thing that escapes him.' An exaggeration, of course – and yet due reflection of the mingled fear and awe that an emperor could hardly help but inspire in his subjects. He alone had command of Rome's monopoly of violence: the legions and the whole menacing apparatus of provincial government, which existed to ensure that taxes were paid, rebels slaughtered, and malefactors thrown to beasts or nailed up on crosses. There was no need for an emperor constantly to be showing his hand for dread of his arbitrary power to be universal across the world. Small wonder, then, that the face of Caesar should have become, for millions of his subjects, the face of Rome. Rare was the town that did not boast some image of him: a statue, a portrait bust, a frieze. Even in the most provincial backwater, to handle money was to be familiar with Caesar's profile. Within Augustus's own lifetime, no living citizen had ever appeared on a Roman coin; but no sooner had he seized control of the world than his face was being minted everywhere, stamped on gold, and silver, and bronze. 'Whose likeness and inscription is this?' Even an itinerant street-preacher in the wilds of Galilee, holding up a coin and demanding to know whose face it portrayed, could be confident of the answer: 'Caesar's.'

No surprise, then, that the character of an emperor, his achievements, his relationships and his foibles, should have been topics of obsessive fascination to his subjects. 'Your destiny it is to live as in a theatre where your audience is the entire world.'9 Such was the warning attributed by one Roman historian to Maecenas, a particularly trusted confidant of Augustus's. Whether he really said it or not, the sentiment was true to the sheer theatricality of his master's performance. Augustus himself, lying on his deathbed, was reported by Suetonius to have asked his friends whether he had played his part well in the comedy of life; and then, on being assured that he had, to have demanded their applause as he headed for the exit. A good emperor had no choice but to be a good actor – as too did everyone else in the drama's cast. Caesar, after all, was never alone on the stage. His potential successors were public figures simply by virtue of their relationship to him. Even the wife, the niece or the granddaughter of an emperor might have her role to play. Get it wrong, and she was liable to pay a terrible price; but get it right, and her face might end up appearing on coins alongside Caesar's own. No household in history had ever before been so squarely in the public eye as that of Augustus. The fashions and hairstyles of its most prominent members, reproduced in exquisite detail by sculptors across the Empire, set trends from Syria to Spain. Their achievements were celebrated with spectacularly showy monuments, their scandals repeated with relish from seaport to seaport. Propaganda and gossip, each feeding off the other, gave to the dynasty of Augustus a celebrity that ranked, for the first time, as continent-spanning.

To what extent, though, did all the vaunting claims chiselled into showy marble and all the rumours whispered in marketplaces and bars approximate to what had actually happened in Caesar's palace? To be sure, by the time that Suetonius came to write his biographies of the emperors, there was no lack of material for him to draw upon: everything from official inscriptions to garbled gossip. Shrewder analysts, though, when they sought to make sense of Augustus and his heirs, could recognise at the heart of the dynasty's story a darkness that mocked and defied their efforts. Once, back in the days of the Republic, affairs of state had been debated in public, and the speeches of Rome's leaders transcribed for historians to study; but with the coming to power of Augustus, all that had changed. 'For, from then on, things began to be done secretly, and in such a way as not to be made public.' Yes, the old rhythms of the political year, the annual cycle of elections and magistracies that once, back in the days of the Republic, had delivered to ambitious Romans the genuine opportunity to sway their city's fate, still endured – but as a largely irrelevant sideshow. The

cockpit of power lay elsewhere now. The world had come to be governed, not in assemblies of the great and good, but in private chambers. A woman's whisperings in an emperor's ear, a document discreetly passed to him by a slave: either might have a greater impact than even the most ringing public oration. The implication, for any biographer of the Caesars, was grim but inescapable. 'Even when it comes to notable events, we are in the dark.'

Users Review

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