

THE RISE AND
FALL OF THE HOUSE
OF CAESAR



DYNASTY



TOM HOLLAND

AUTHOR OF
RUBICON

Nonfiction

RUBICON

The Last Years of the Roman Republic

PERSIAN FIRE

The First World Empire and the Battle for the West

THE FORGE OF CHRISTENDOM

The End of Days and the Epic Rise of the West

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DELIVER US FROM EVIL

THE SLEEPER IN THE SANDS

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Translations

The Histories by Herodotus

TOM
HOLLAND

DYNASTY

The Rise and Fall of
the House of Caesar

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For Katy

‘at simul heroum laudes et facta parentis iam legere...’

CONTENTS

Cover
Also by Tom Holland
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Acknowledgements
List of Maps
Family Tree
Preface
Epigraph

I PADRONE

- 1 CHILDREN OF THE WOLF
- 2 BACK TO THE FUTURE
- 3 THE EXHAUSTION OF CRUELTY

II COSA NOSTRA

- 4 THE LAST ROMAN
- 5 LET THEM HATE ME
- 6 IO SATURNALIA!
- 7 WHAT AN ARTIST

Timeline
Dramatis Personae
Notes
Bibliography
Illustrations

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MAPS

The Roman World in 44 BC

Central Rome

Italy

Augustan Rome

Germany

The East

The Bay of Naples

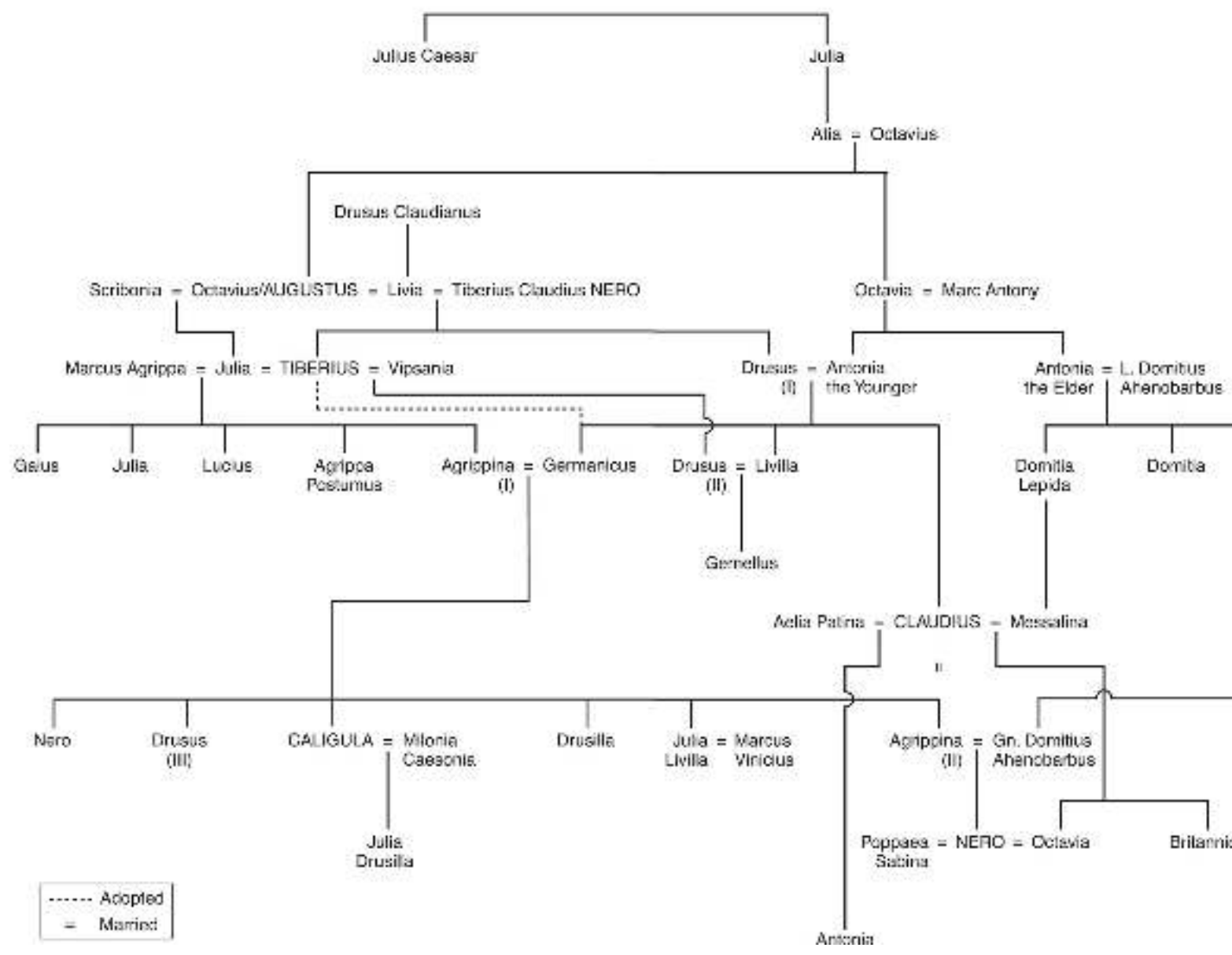
Gaul and Britain

Nero's Rome

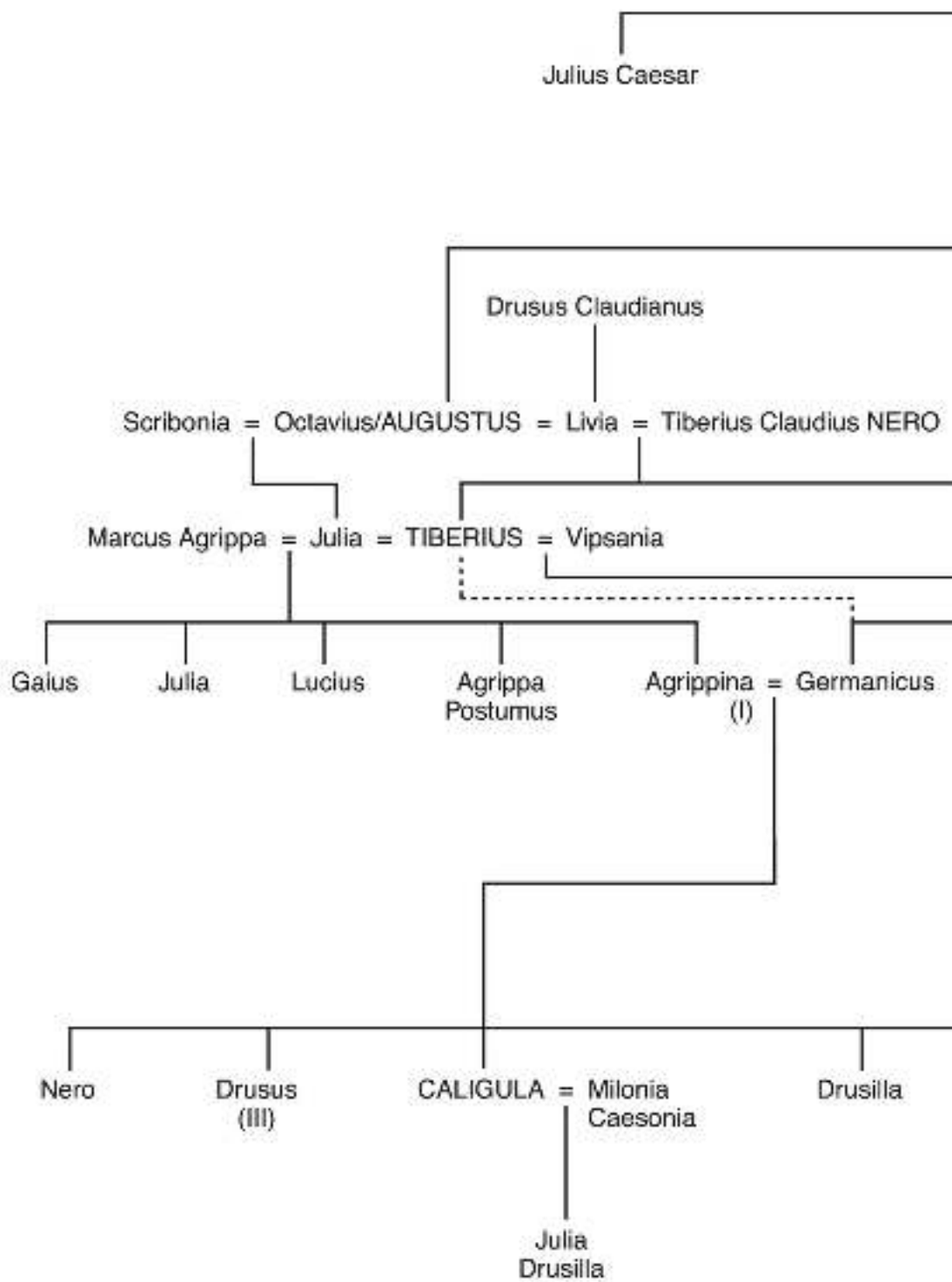
Greece

The Roman World in AD 69

The Julians and Claudians

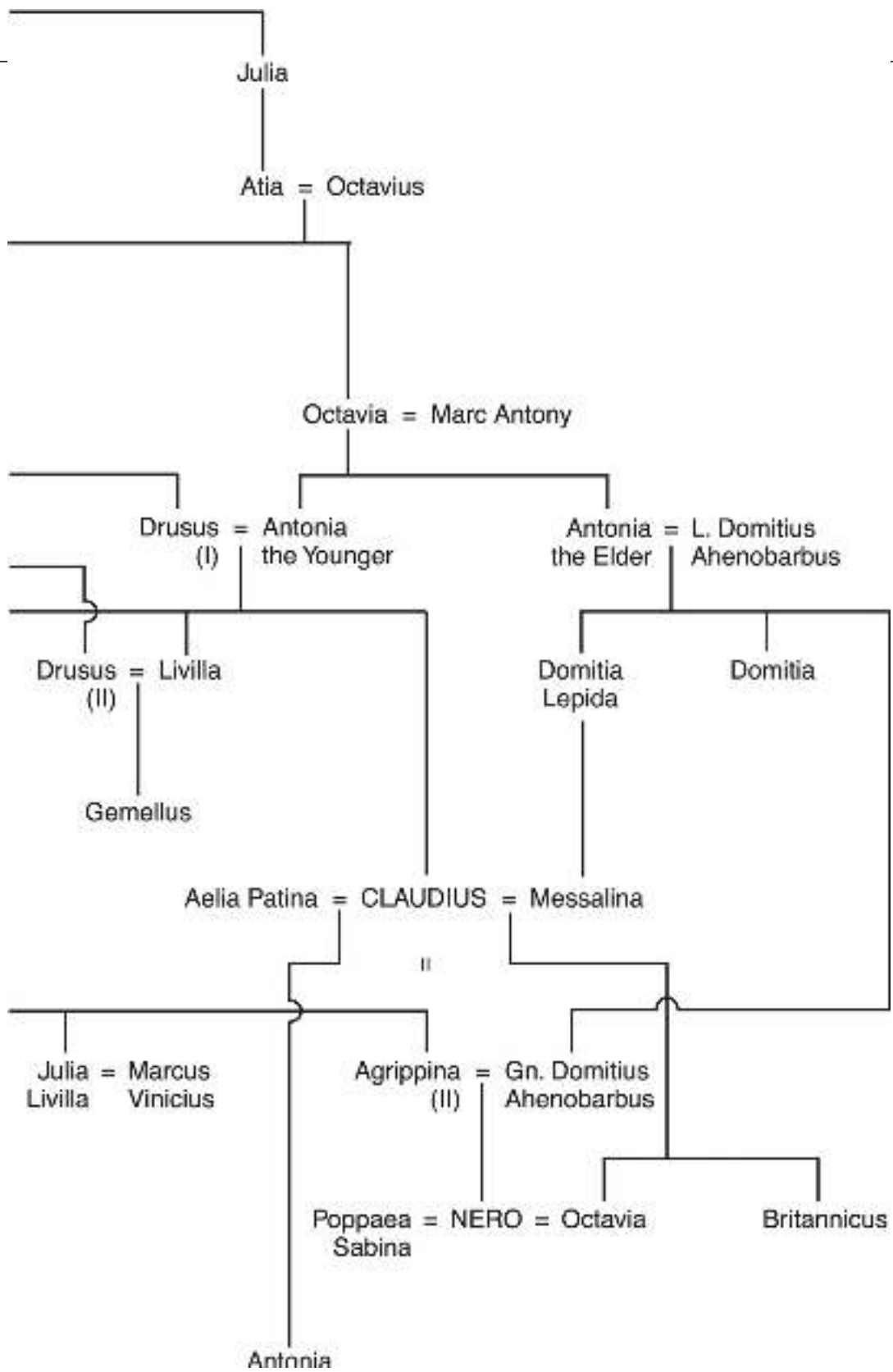


The Julians and Claudians



----- Adopted
 = Married

Detail left



Detail right

PREFACE

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 green waters, while beyond the horizon there lies an island teeming with savage and mustachioed headhunters: 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, and battlefield artillery. The Emperor Gaius scans their length. He gives a command. At once, there is the 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.’¹ 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.’² 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.’³

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 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 mo

murderous bouts of slaughtering one another had the Roman people finally been inured to the 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 Julius Caesar, he had waded through blood to secure the command of Rome and her empire – and the his rivals once dispatched, had coolly posed as a prince of peace. As cunning as he was ruthless, patient as he was decisive, Augustus had managed to maintain his supremacy for decades, and then 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 expedencies, 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.’⁴ 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.’⁵

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 furthestmost 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.'⁶ 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.'⁷ 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.^{*1} '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.'⁸

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 and die 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 before 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 a 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 recognize 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.'¹¹

The historian who delivered this warning, although a close contemporary of Suetonius, was immeasurably his superior as a pathologist of autocracy – indeed, perhaps the greatest there has ever been. Cornelius Tacitus could draw on an intimate understanding of how Rome and her empire functioned. Over the course of a glittering career, he had spoken in the law courts, governed provinces and held the highest magistracies to which a citizen could aspire; but he had also demonstrated a canny, if inglorious, instinct for survival. The dynasty that ruled Rome as he came of age was no longer that of Augustus, which had expired amid a welter of blood back in AD 68 – but it was potentially no less murderous for that. Rather than stand up to its exactions, Tacitus had opted to keep his head down, his gaze averted. The crimes of omission in which he felt himself complicit seem never entirely to have been cleansed from his conscience. The more he came to stand at a distance from public life, the more obsessively he sought to fathom the depths of the regime under which he was obliged to live, and to track how it had evolved. First he narrated the events of his own youth and adulthood; and then, in his final and greatest work, a history that has been known since the sixteenth century as *The Annals*, he turned his gaze back upon the dynasty of Augustus. Augustus himself, and his fateful primacy, Tacitus chose to analyse only in the most oblique manner: by focusing, not upon the man himself, but rather upon his heirs. Four Caesars in succession accordingly took centre stage: first Tiberius; then Caligula; then Caligula's uncle, Claudius; and finally, the last of the dynasty to rule, Augustus's great-great-grandson, Nero. His death it was that marked the end of the line. Again and again, membership of the imperial family had been shown to come at fatal cost. By AD 68, not a single descendant of Augustus remained alive. Such was the measure of the story that Tacitus had to tell.

And of something else as well: the challenge of telling the story at all. Mordantly, in the first paragraph of *The Annals*, Tacitus spelt out the problem. 'The histories of Tiberius and Caligula, of Claudius and Nero, were falsified while they remained alive out of dread – and then, after their deaths, were composed under the influence of still festering hatreds.'¹² Only the most diligent research, the most studied objectivity, would do. Painstaking in his efforts to study the official records of each emperor's reign, Tacitus made equally sure never to take them on trust.^{*2} Words, under the Caesars, had become slippery, treacherous things. 'The age was a tainted one, degraded by its sycophancy.' The bleakness of this judgement, bred as it was of personal experience, ensured that Tacitus's bitter

scepticism ended up corroding all that it touched. In *The Annals*, not a Caesar who claimed to be acting in the best interests of the Roman people but he was a hypocrite; not an attempt to stay true to the city's traditions but it was a sham; not a fine-sounding sentiment but it was a lie. Rome's history is portrayed as a nightmare, haunted by terror and shadowed by blood, from which it is impossible for her citizens to awake. It is a portrait of despotism that many subsequent generations, witnessing the dimming of their own liberties, have not been slow to recognise. Wherever a tyranny has been planted on the ruins of a previously free order, and whenever specious slogans have been used to mask state-sanctioned crimes, it has been remembered. The dynasty of Augustus still defines the look of autocratic power.

That it should so haunt the public imagination comes, then, as little surprise. When people think of imperial Rome, it is the city of the first Caesars that is most likely to come into their minds. There is no other period of ancient history that can compare for sheer unsettling fascination with its gallery of leading characters. Their lurid glamour has resulted in them becoming the very archetypes of feuding and murderous dynasts. Monsters such as we find in the pages of Tacitus and Suetonius seem sprung from some fantasy novel or TV box-set: Tiberius, grim, paranoid, and with a taste for having his testicles licked by young boys in swimming pools; Caligula, lamenting that the Roman people did not have a single neck, so that he might cut it through; Agrippina, the mother of Nero, scheming to bring to power the son who would end up having her murdered; Nero himself, kicking his pregnant wife to death, marrying a eunuch, and raising a pleasure palace over the fire-gutted centre of Rome. For those who like their tales of dynastic back-stabbing spiced up with poison and exotic extremes of perversion, the story might well seem to have everything. Murderous matriarchs, incestuous powercouples, downtrodden beta males who nevertheless end up wielding powers of life and death: all these staples of recent dramas are to be found in the sources for the period. The first Caesars, more than any comparable dynasty, remain to this day household names. Their celebrity holds.

All of which, it is as well to admit, can be a cause of some embarrassment to historians of the period. Tales of poison and depravity, precisely because so melodramatic, have a tendency to make them feel uncomfortable. The more sensational a story, after all, the less plausible it is liable to seem. The truth of the allegations laid against the Julio-Claudians – as the dynasty of Augustus is conventionally known by scholars – has for this reason long provoked disagreement. Could Caligula, for instance, really have been as mad as Suetonius and other ancient authors claimed? Perhaps, rather than insane, his more flamboyant stunts had simply been garbled in the transmission? Was it possible, for instance, that behind the seeming lunacy of his order to pick up seashells there was in fact a perfectly rational explanation? Many scholars have suggested as much. Over the years, numerous theories have been proposed. Perhaps – although no source mentions it – there had been a mutiny, and Caligula was looking to punish his soldiers by giving them some demeaning task? Or maybe he wanted them to look for pearls, or else for shells that he could then use to ornament water features? Or perhaps *concha*, the Latin word for ‘shell’, was in fact being used by Caligula to signify something quite different: a kind of boat, or even the genitals of a whore? Any of these suggestions are possible, but none of them is definitive. Like a vivid dream, the episode seems haunted by the sense of some unfathomable logic, some meaning that all our efforts to understand it are doomed never quite to grasp. Such is often the frustration of ancient history: that there are things we will never know for certain.

None of which need necessarily be cause for despair. Known unknowns are not without their value to the historian of the first Caesars. The question of what precisely Caligula might have been getting

up to on that Gallic beach will never be settled decisively; but what we do know for certain is that Roman historians did not feel that it particularly needed an explanation. They took for granted that ordering soldiers to pick up shells was the kind of thing that a bad, mad emperor did. The stories of Caligula – that he insulted the gods, that he took pleasure in cruelty, that he revelled in every kind of sexual deviancy – were not unique to him. Rather, they were a part of the common stock of rumours that swirled whenever a Caesar offended the proprieties of the age. ‘Leave ugly shadows alone when they lurk in their abyss of shame’:¹⁴ this po-faced admonition, delivered by an anthologist improving stories during the reign of Tiberius, was one that few of his fellow citizens were inclined to follow. They adored gossip far too much. The anecdotes told of the imperial dynasty, holding up as they do a mirror to the deepest prejudices and terrors of those who swapped them, transport us to the heart of the Roman psyche. It is why any study of Augustus’s dynasty can never simply be that, but must also serve as something more: a portrait of the Roman people themselves.

It is also why a narrative history, one that covers the entire span of the Julio-Claudian period, offers perhaps the surest way of steering a path between the Scylla of flaccid gullibility and the Charybdis of an overly muscle-bound scepticism. Clearly, not all stories told about the early Caesars are to be trusted; but equally, many of them do provide us with a handle on what most probably inspired them. Anecdotes that can seem utterly fantastical when read in isolation often appear much less so with the perspective that a narrative provides. The evolution of autocracy in Rome was a protracted and contingent business. Augustus, although ranked by historians as the city’s first emperor, was never officially instituted as a monarch. Instead, he ruled by virtue of rights and honours voted him in piecemeal fashion. No formal procedure ever existed to govern the succession; and this ensured that each emperor in turn, on coming to power, was left with little option but to test the boundaries of what he could and could not do. As a result, the Julio-Claudians presided over one long continuous process of experimentation. That is why I have chosen in this book to trace the entire course of the dynasty from its foundation to its final bloody expiration. The reign of each emperor is best understood, not on its own terms, but in the context of what preceded and followed it.

And all the more so because the study of the period, as is invariably the case with ancient history, can sometimes resemble the frustration of listening to an old-fashioned car radio, with various stations forever fading in and out of audibility. If only, for instance, we had the account by Tacitus of Caligula’s actions on that beach by the Channel – but alas, we do not. Everything that *The Annals* had to report about the years between the death of Tiberius and the halfway stage of Claudius’s reign has been lost. That Caligula, the most notorious member of his dynasty, should also be the Julio-Claudian for whose reign the sources are the patchiest is almost certainly not a coincidence. Although two thousand years of repetition might give us the impression that the narrative of the period has long since been settled, in many cases it has not. It remains as important, when studying ancient history, to recognise what we do not know as to tease out what we do. Readers should be aware that much of the narrative of this book, like the pontoon bridge that Caligula once built between two promontories in the Bay of Naples, spans turbulent depths. Controversy and disagreement are endemic to the study of the period. Yet this, of course, is precisely its fascination. Over the past few decades, the range and vitality of scholarly research into the Julio-Claudians have revolutionised our understanding of the age. If this book manages to give readers even a flavour of how exciting it is to study Rome’s first imperial dynasty, then it will not have failed in its aim. Two millennia on, the West’s primal example of tyranny continue to instruct and appal.

‘Nothing could be fainter than those torches which allow us, not to pierce the darkness, but

glimpse it.’¹⁵ So wrote Seneca, shortly before his death in AD 65. The context of his observation was a shortcut that he had recently taken while travelling along the Bay of Naples, down a gloomy and dust-choked tunnel. ‘What a prison it was, and how long. Nothing could compare with it.’ As a man who had spent many years observing the imperial court, Seneca knew all about darkness. Caligula, resentful of his brilliance, had only narrowly been dissuaded from having him put to death; Claudius, offended by his adulterous affair with one of Caligula’s sisters, had banished him to Corsica; Agrippina, looking for someone to rein in the vicious instincts of her son, had appointed him Nero’s tutor. Seneca, who would ultimately be compelled by his erstwhile student to slit his own veins, had no illusions as to the nature of the regime he served. Even the peace that it had brought the world, he declared, had ultimately been founded upon nothing more noble than ‘the exhaustion of cruelty’. Despotism had been implicit in the new order from its very beginning.

Yet what he detested Seneca also adored. Contempt for power did not inhibit him from revelling in it. The darkness of Rome was lit by gold. Two thousand years on, we too, looking back to Augustus and his heirs, can recognise in their mingling of tyranny and achievement, sadism and glamour, power-lust and celebrity, an aureate quality such as no dynasty since has ever quite managed to match.

‘Caesar and the state are one and the same.’¹⁷

How this came to be so is a story no less compelling, no less remarkable and no less salutary than has ever been these past two thousand years.

*1 The earliest portrait of a living Roman on a Roman coin seems to have been of Julius Caesar. It was minted in 44 BC – the year, not coincidentally, of his assassination.

*2 The recent discovery in Spain of a decree issued under Tiberius has shed intriguing light on Tacitus’s methods. There can be no doubt that he had detailed knowledge of its wording; nor that he fully appreciated the degree to which it expressed, not the truth, but rather what those who had composed it wished to be taken for the truth.

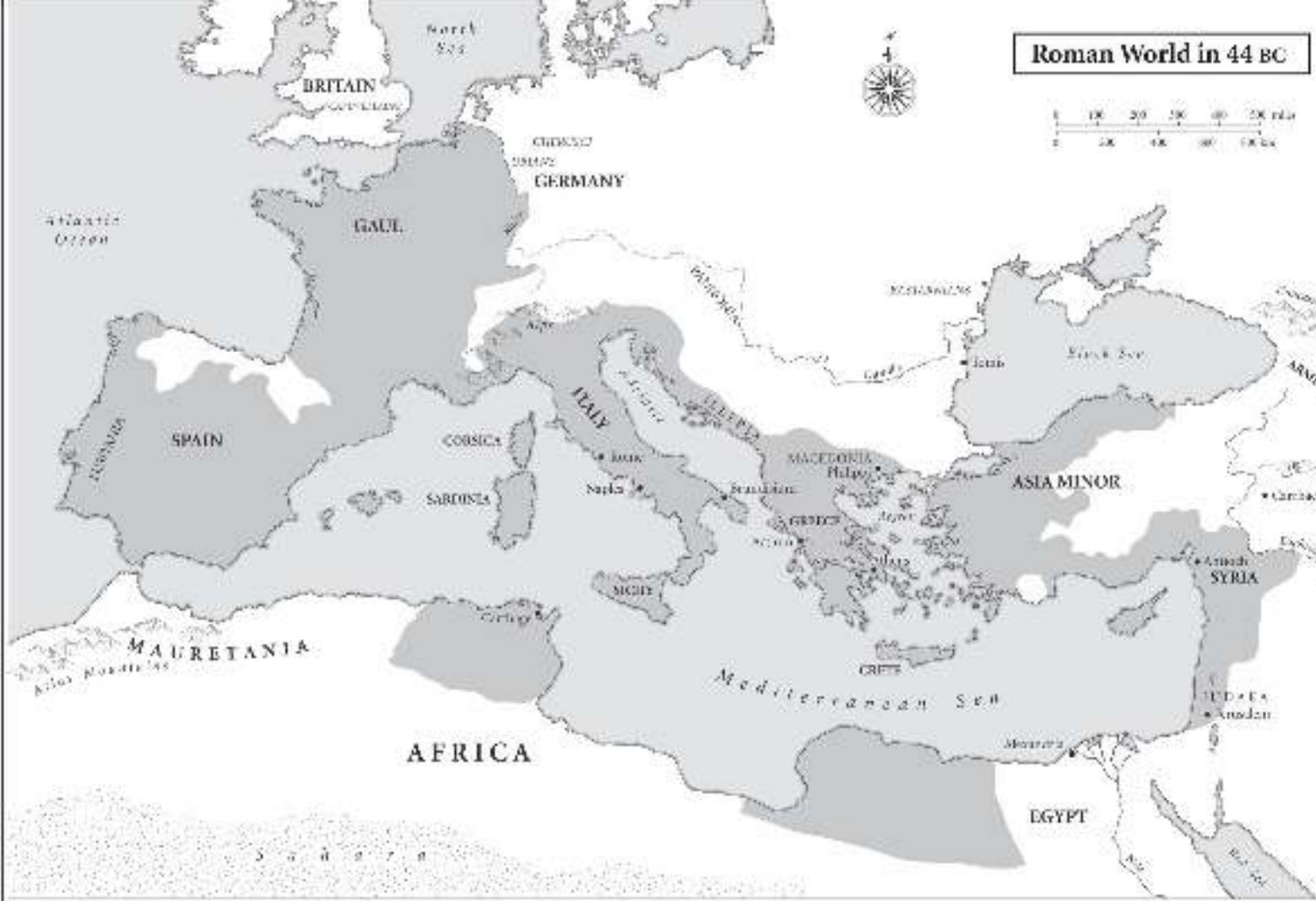
~~Guard, preserve and protect the way things now stand: the peace we enjoy, and our~~
emperor. And when he has done his duty, after a life that I pray may be as long as
possible, grace him with successors whose shoulders will prove as sufficient to
support the burden of our global empire as we have found his to be.

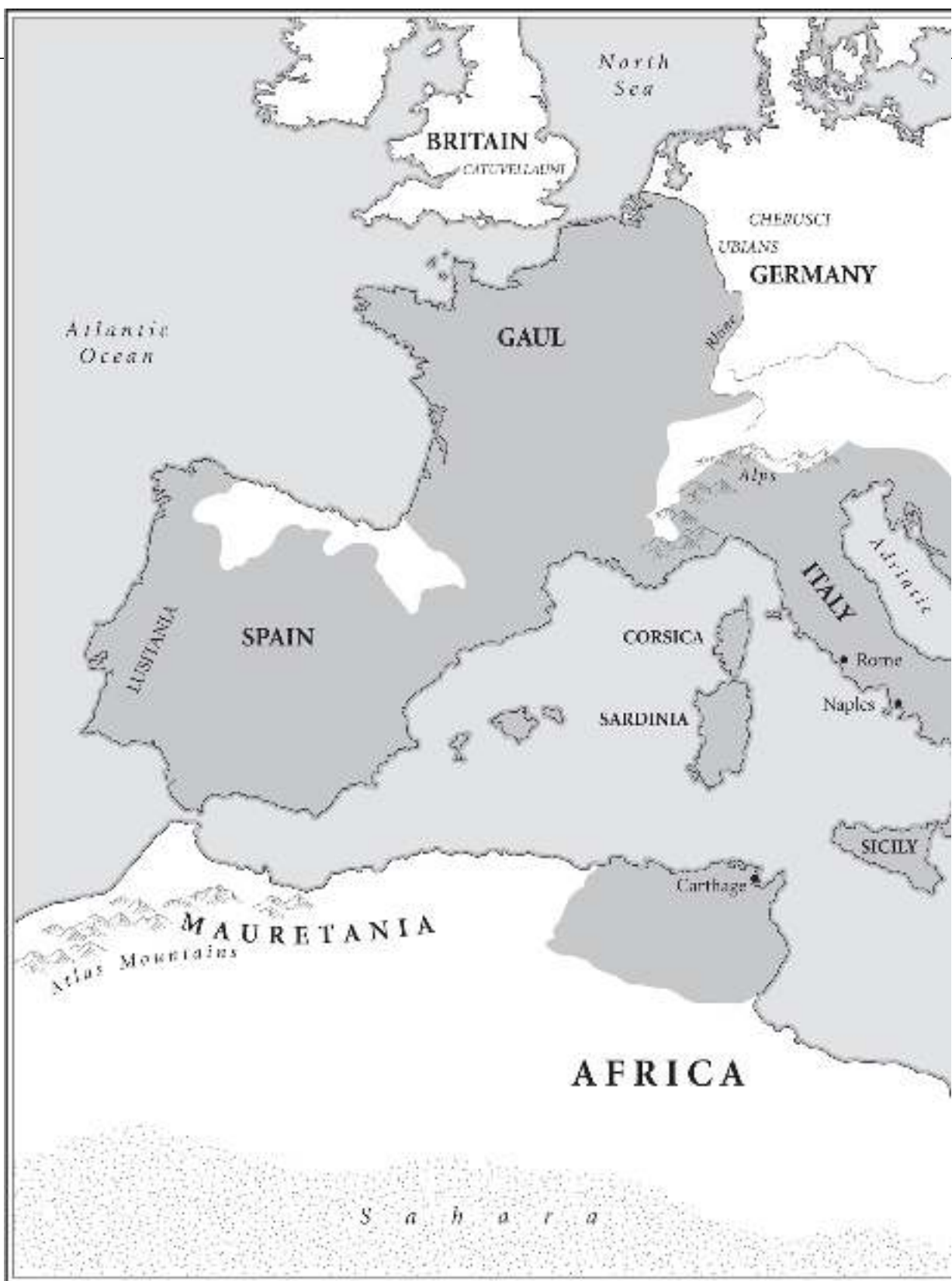
—Velleius Paterculus (c. 20 BC–c. AD 31)

*The stain of the wrongs committed back in ancient times by these men Will never fade
from the history books. Until the very end of time, The monstrous deeds of the House
of Caesar will stand condemned.*

—Claudian (c. AD 370–404)

Roman World in 44 BC





Detail left



Detail right

PADRONE

CHILDREN OF THE WOLF

The Making of a Superpower

The story of Rome began with a rape. A princess, a consecrated virgin, was surprised and ravished. Various accounts were given of the fateful assault. Some said that it happened in her sleep, when she dreamed that a man of miraculous beauty led her down to a shady river bank, and abandoned her there, lost and alone. Others claimed that she was seized in the middle of a thunderstorm, while collecting water from a sacred grove. One story even told of a mysterious phallus which sprang up from the ashes of the royal hearth and took, not the princess, but her slavegirl. All were agreed, though, on the resulting pregnancy; and most – a few curmudgeonly revisionists aside – had no doubt that the rapist was a god.*¹ Mars, the Spiller of Blood, had planted his seed in a mortal womb.

Two god-like boys were duly born of the rape. These twins, the offspring of their mother's shame, had no sooner been delivered than they were dumped into a nearby river, the Tiber. Still the wonder did not cease. Swept along on the floodwaters of the river, the box to which the two babies had been consigned eventually ran aground below a steep hill named the Palatine. There, in the mouth of a cave, beneath the dripping, fruit-laden branches of a fig tree, the twins were discovered by a she-wolf; and the wolf, rather than devouring them, licked them clean of mud and offered their hungry mouths its teats. A passing swineherd, witnessing this miraculous scene, came clambering down the slopes of the Palatine to their rescue. The she-wolf slunk off. The two boys, rescued by the swineherd and given the names Remus and Romulus, grew up to become peerless warriors. In due course, standing on the Palatine, Romulus had seen twelve eagles: a sure sign from the gods that he should found, there on the summit of the hill, the city which ever afterwards bore his name. It was he who ruled Rome as its first king.

This, at any rate, was the story told centuries later by the Roman people to explain the origins of their city, and the sheer glorious scale of their martial achievements. Foreigners, when they learnt of it, certainly found it all too plausible. That Romulus had been fathered by Mars, the god of war, and suckled by a she-wolf appeared – to those brought into bruising contact with his descendants – to explain much about the Roman character.¹ Even a people like the Macedonians, who under Alexander the Great had themselves conquered a vast empire, almost to the rising of the sun, knew that the Romans were a breed of men quite unlike any other. One brief, opening skirmish, fought to indecisive effect in 200 BC, had been enough to bring this home. Five centuries and more had passed since the age of Romulus – and yet there still clung to the Romans, so it appeared to their opponents, something of the chilling quality of creatures bred of myth. The Macedonians, retrieving their dead from the battlefield, had been appalled by the shambles they discovered there. Bodies mutilated and dismembered by Roman swords had soaked the earth with blood. Arms with the shoulders still attached, severed heads, reeking puddles of viscera: all bore witness to a pitch of violence mo-

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