

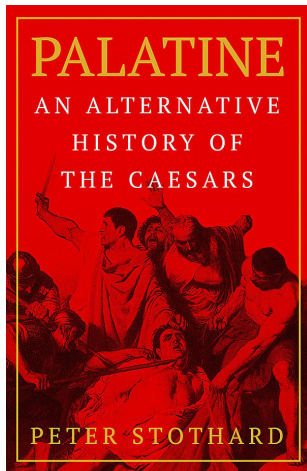
## Book Review

### Palatine: An Alternative History of the Caesars

Stothard (P.), Pp. xxii + 314, maps. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2023. Cased, £22. ISBN: 978-1474620994

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The title of this history begs the question of what it might be an alternative to. It covers much the same ground that Suetonius does, though with a prose style and narrative pattern that is better suited to contemporary sensibilities. It would be less an alternative than a complement to *I, Claudius*, whether the recent re-broadcast of the 1970s television series sends viewers back first to Robert Graves' book or not. Those interested in Stothard's book would likely also find Tom Holland's *Dynasty* worth reading, or his more recent

*Pax*. Mary Beard's most recent book, *Emperor of Rome*, begins with Julius Caesar and ends with Alexander Severus; its subtitle, *Ruling the Ancient Roman World*, suggests a conventional rather than an alternative history; but Beard's histories somehow always come off as alternatives to older accounts. Both Beard and Holland furnish blurbs in praise of Stothard. In any case, it does seem as though everyone is thinking about the Roman Empire these days; and it is the duty of Classics teachers to get people who are thinking about Rome to read about it. *Palatine* is a viable and promising option.

The most obvious way in which this is an alternative history of the Caesars is that it is focused not on the ruling of the Roman world but on the administration of the imperial household. The chronology involved begins with the end of the reign of Augustus, and ends with the beginning of the reign of Vespasian; but the narrative structure is established by its introductory focus on the life and career of Aulus Vitellius (12-69 CE) – yes, *that* Vitellius, the third of the four emperors who claimed that title during the Year of the Four Emperors. A standard history of the 1st century emperors, once it gets this far, usually wants to get the names straight and the reigns out of the way. Vespasian, after all, built the Colosseum; Titus conquered Jerusalem; Domitian was a 'Bad Emperor', whose reign gave way to an edifying succession of good ones. Galba, Otho, and Vitellius seem to appear out of nowhere before disappearing

into infamy; and that, apparently, is all that can be said about them. But in fact, and of course, they didn't appear out of nowhere but had long careers as courtiers, magistrates, and commanders.

Aulus Vitellius was also a third-generation administrator of the imperial household. His grandfather, Publius Vitellius, had served Augustus. By the time of Augustus' death, the sons of Publius (as well as a daughter) had begun to make their ways and find their places in the *domus Caesaris*. This was always a dangerous game, but was especially so when it came to an imperial succession. Lucius Vitellius proved especially adept at securing and maintaining the friendship of the emperor, and so served three of them. His son Aulus began his career as a companion of Caligula; but we all know how his rule went and ended. Aulus was able to keep his place in the imperial household because his father was able to. According to Stothard, the most important skills an imperial courtier could have were flattery and gluttony: Lucius excelled at flattery, and Aulus indulged in gluttony, which to this day distinguishes him from Galba and Otho.

Stothard's history is in three parts, each comprising a number of brief chapters with vivid and revealing titles. These alternately set the stage and tell the tales that bring the characters to life and set them in motion. Following the 'Table of Contents' is a list of the 'Main Characters', organised according to family or function. We then see all the same names arranged on their family trees. I have found myself consulting these pages as I make my way through the complicated and sensational narrative. But Stothard also makes sure that the narrative holds up and surges ahead, on its own terms and under its own steam. He tells us that Augustus, on his deathbed, 'checked on the health of his chosen successor's granddaughter, nine years old and one of many called Julia, who was ill' (p. 12). That Julia, who recovered from this illness, reappears at several points, in different connections, all tending to illustrate the family dynamics and dynastic politics of the early Roman Empire. Another of the cast of characters who makes the most of a minor role is one named Phaedrus, a Greek freedman in the imperial court who translated the fables of Aesop and made them a telling set of observations about the Palatine lifestyle.

By the time we come to the Year of the Four Emperors, the narrative turns from the Palatine to the provinces, but we don't lose sight of the key manoeuvres and developments. The death of Nero meant the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty; the next emperor would be someone else, and made emperor in some other way. There was no going back to republican government. But Galba, Otho, and Vitellius had to activate all the instincts and exercise all the abilities that had allowed them to survive the reigns of the previous four emperors, though they would each now fall in turn, making way for Vespasian and the Flavian dynasty. Stothard's narrative verve and analytic command give his account of all this a fine clarity in the midst of its complexities.

As I write – from Rome – the Domus Tiberiana on the Palatine has just reopened to the public after over 50 years, and following extensive excavations and renovations. This is the setting for much of Stothard's alternative history of the Caesars. Tiberius himself, of course, spent much of his time on Capri, and there is a sense in which the imperial household is wherever the emperor is; but the Palatine Hill, in its ruined and restored state, was and is, even if empty, at the centre of our study of the Roman Empire. Read this book, visit that palace, and the history will fill it.

doi: 10.1017/S2058631024000205