Regular listeners to this podcast may conceivably have heard me mention that I have a book out at the moment, Pax, which is about the heyday of the Roman Empire. It came out in Britain and Australia a few months back, but very excited to announce that it is coming out in America now. And I kind of wanted to tempt you, give you a little teaser. So what you're about to hear, I'm afraid does not feature Dominic. So that may immediately put you off. But if it doesn't, this is the introduction to Pax. It kind of spells out what the remit of the book is, gives a kind of brief sketch of the Roman world, the themes that I'll be discussing. And I very much hope that you enjoy it. Thank you.

In AD 122, the world's most powerful man arrived on the banks of the Tine. The river, which flows through what today is the city of Newcastle, was the most northerly point that had ever been visited by a Roman emperor. Below it stretched lowland Britain, the fertile southern half of the island, which over the course of the previous 80 years had been conquered, classified and tamed by the legions. Beyond it lay the wilds of the north, lands too savage and poverty stricken to merit conquest. Such at any rate was the judgment of the visiting Caesar. Publius Aelius Hadrianus Hadrian was a man well qualified to distinguish between civilization and barbarism. He had studied with philosophers and ridden to war against headhunters, lived both in Athens and on an island in the Danube. Prior to his arrival in Britain, he had been on a tour of military bases along the Rhine and given orders for a great palisade to be built beyond the river's eastern bank. Now, standing beside the grey waters of the Tine, Hadrian had plans for an even more formidable marvel of engineering. The boldness of the project was evident from the very presence of Caesar in Britain. It was not only his legions who needed squaring, so too did the gods. Sacrifices had to be made, both to the ocean, that immense and fearsome expanse of water in which Britain was set, and to the Tine itself. Hadrian, a man punctilious in his dealings with the supernatural, knew better than to commission a bridge without assuaging the spirit of the divine that was manifest in every river. Ponsilius, the structure was named, Hadrian's bridge. This, for an obscure spot on the margins of the world, was a signal honour.

Only bridges in Rome were normally named after emperors. In due course, a decade later, when Hadrian came to commission a huge mausoleum for himself on the far bank of the Tiber and wished to provide ready access to it from the capital, Ponsilius was the obvious, the only name for the resulting structure. There were now, with its completion, two very different bridges bearing the imprimata of Hadrian's favour. The result, upon the distant outpost in Britain, was the bestowal of an even more solemn dignity.

It was not just the bridge over the Tine that was called Ponsilius, but the fort that had been constructed on the river's northern bank.

This fort, in turn, was only one of a number of military encampments stretching in a direct line from one shore of the ocean to the other. Joining them and running for 80 miles was a wall fashioned largely out of stone. Behind the wall ran a metaled road. Behind the road ran a ditch dug so deep that it could only be scaled with ladders.

Infrastructure of such an order, built on such a scale, was as awesome a memorial to Hadrian as anything he had sponsored in Rome. It proclaimed a degree of martial effort and a capacity for intimidation that had no rival anywhere. The emperor's visit to the Tine had been fleeting the nearest waystop, but he had left behind him the unmistakable stamp of a superpower.

Not that many Romans ever saw the wall. So distant was it from all that made for civilization,

trade, seafaring, agriculture, metallurgy, all the crafts that exist or have ever existed, everything that is manufactured or grows from the earth, that it tended to serve them as at best a rumour. In time, they would come to forget that it was Hadrian who had built it at all. For a millennium and more after the collapse of Roman rule in Britain, its construction was attributed to another later Caesar, and only in the mid-19th century was the wall conclusively proven to have been the work of Hadrian. Since then, thanks to the labours of generations of archaeologists, epigraphers and historians, our knowledge of how and by whom it was built has improved immeasurably. The study of Hadrian's wall is now, in the words of one scholar, littered with the bones of discarded hypotheses. Meanwhile, along its spectacular central reach, a section which in 1600 had been so infested by bandits that the antiquarian William Camden was forced to omit it altogether from his tour, visitors today are greeted by interpretative signs, gift shops and toilet facilities. Even so, a sense of the mysterious has not been banished entirely from Hadrian's wall. In the early winter of 1981, when an American tourist by the name of George R. R. Martin visited it, dusk was closing in. As the sun set and the wind gusted over the crags, he had the sight to himself. What would it have been like, Martin began wondering, to stand there in Hadrian's time, to be a soldier from Africa or the near east, posted to the very limits of civilization, to gaze into the darkness and dread what might be lurking there. The memory stayed with him. A decade later, when he embarked on a fantasy novel called A Game of Thrones, his visit to Hadrian's wall was to prove a particularly vivid influence, a wall, as he would later describe it, defending civilization against unknown threats beyond. In Martin's fictional world of Westeros, the unknown threats proved to be the others, pale demons formed of snow and cold who make slaves of the dead. The Roman frontier system is recalibrated in his novels, has a 700 foot high wall of ice, 8,000 years old and 300 miles long. It has ancient spells carved into it. Every so often, it gets attacked by mammoths. Martin's version of Hadrian's wall, thanks to the blockbusting success both of his novels and of the TV shows adapted from them, has come to put the original somewhat in the shade. Yet it also demonstrates, perhaps, just how firm the hold of a particular understanding of Rome's empire remains on our collective imagination. There is never any question in A Game of Thrones that our sympathies lie with the night's watch, the soldiers who garrison the wall, rather than with the others. Martin, after all, when he stood on the northernmost limit of Rome's empire and gazed out into the dusk, had been imagining himself a Roman, not a Britain. People visiting Hadrian's wall rarely identify with the natives. Novels and films that feature it invariably adopt the occupier's perspective. To venture beyond the limits of Roman civilization, whether with a doomed legion or in search of a lost eagle, is to venture into a heart of darkness. Rudyard Kipling, the great laureate of the British Empire, cast the wall itself as a monument to civilization. Just when you think you're at the world's end, you see a smoke from east to west as far as the eye can turn, and then, under it, also as far as the eye can stretch. Houses and temples, shops and theatres, barracks and granaries, trickling along like dice behind, always behind, one long, low rising and falling and hiding and showing line of towers. And that is the wall. Even today, in an age infinitely less keen on imperialism than it was in 1906, when Kipling published his stories about Rome and Britain, it is possible to cast the presence of soldiers on Hadrian's wall from Morocco or Syria as a cause for celebration. It was to emphasize this aspect of the wall that the BBC, in a recent film made for children about Hadrian's

arrival in Britain, amended chronology so as to portray the governor of the province at the time
as African. The same Roman Empire that built a wall across its most barbarous frontier,
and ruled perhaps 30% of the world's population, remains today what it has been since the late 18th
century, a mirror in which we feel flattered to catch our own reflection. It was Edward Gibbon
in 1776 who originally cast the second century AD as the most golden of golden ages. Famously,
in the first volume of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, he defined the reigns of Hadrian
and of his immediate predecessors and successors as the period in the history of the world
during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous.
Everywhere, from the Tyne to the Sahara and from the Atlantic to Arabia, lay at peace.
Lands that once, prior to the establishment of Roman rule, had been convulsed by internecine
conflict. Kingdom against kingdom, city against city, tribe against tribe, had come to lie,
as Gibbon put it, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom. True, this commendation came with
various caveats. Subtle and mordant, Gibbon was far too knowing to imagine that any period of
history had truly been paradise. He was alert to the autocratic character of the Caesar's rule,
and he knew, of course, none better what was to come. Even so, to a man of his temperament,
refined, tolerant, respectful of learning and commerce, the world ruled by Hadrian appeared
immeasurably preferable to the barbarism and superstition that he identified with the Middle
Ages. The frontiers of that extensive monarchy, he wrote, were guarded by ancient renown and
disciplined valour. The gentle but powerful influence of laws and manners had gradually
cemented the union of the provinces. Their peaceful inhabitants enjoyed and abused the advantages
of
wealth and luxury. The tone of gentle irony with which Gibbon framed this account of the empire's
prosperity implied no scorn for the Romans' achievement. Order was better than chaos,
and the order brought by the Caesars, too, as Gibbon put it, the fairest part of the earth
and the most civilized portion of mankind, was indeed a thing of wonder. Gibbon knew this
because it had been a thing of wonder to the Romans themselves. They had marvelled at the
spectacle of one-time enemies laying down their weapons and devoting themselves instead to the
arts so that cities everywhere were radiant with beauty and the countryside like a garden.
They had reveled in the scale of the shipping that crowded the seas, bearing treasures from as far
afield as India. They had felt moved that the flames of sacrifice, previously docks of isolated fire,
were now something inextinguishable, passing ceaselessly from people to people,
always ablaze somewhere across the face of the world. Such it might seem to a provincial raised
in Hadrian's empire with the fruits of the Roman peace, the Pax Romana.
Since the time of Gibbon, knowledge of how this peace functioned and was maintained has improved
by quantum leaps. Archaeological sites have been excavated, inscriptions tabulated and evaluated,
papyrian writing tablets dug up from rubbish tips painstakingly transcribed,
and the immense mass of evidence synthesized to a degree that would have stupefied and delighted
Gibbon. Confidence on the part of Western scholars that the empire ruled by Hadrian
did indeed comprehend the fairest part of the earth was long ago qualified by an awareness
that it was not the only superpower on the face of the Eurasian landmass. Today, comparative
studies
of Roman and Chinese imperialism are as cutting edge afield of scholarship as any in ancient history.
Nevertheless, the sheer scale and duration of the peace that was imposed on the western
edge of Eurasia during the first and second centuries AD, a period when for the first time

much of it constituted a single political unit, remains unparalleled. As in the 1770s so today,
no one can claim, as the Caesars proudly did, that the Mediterranean is exclusively theirs.
Even the prosperity of the Roman world, which is liable to seem to 21st century consumers,
a good deal less dazzling than it did to Gibbon, is still perfectly capable of impressing economists.
Living conditions, so the great professor emeritus of economics at the Massachusetts Institute of
Technology has calculated, were better in the earlier Roman Empire than anywhere else and any
time else before the Industrial Revolution. Inevitably, the lack of precise data being what
it is, the size and efficiency of the Roman economy in the first two centuries AD, remain
topics of furious debate, and yet the resources that were available to cities across the empire
are familiar not just as scholars of the period, but to countless numbers of tourists.
It is hard, even for the most casual visitor to Ephesus or to Pompeii, not to feel impressed by the
sites. Temples and theatres, baths and libraries, paving stones and central heating, all constitute
ready markers of the Pax Romana. To this day, whether in films, cartoons or computer games,
they serve as shorthand not just for the heyday of the Roman Empire, but for civilization itself.
But what did the Romans ever do for us? The answer, sanitation, medicine, education, wine,
public order, irrigation, roads, freshwater systems and public health. Such a list, even as it flatters
the Pax Romana, hardly sums it up, of course. If there was light, there was also darkness.
The most famous of all Roman monuments, beloved alike of the Italian tourist industry and
Hollywood,
was a stage for the spilling of blood. The cross that once stood in the centre of the
Colosseum may be long gone, removed by archaeologists in the 1870s, but the murderous
entertainment staged in the amphitheatre, even if there is no hard evidence that Christians were
ever fed to lions there, remain as much a focus for moral disapproval today as they did back when
the site hosted a chapel and the stations of the cross. No one watching gladiator sides with the
emperor. In our instinctive sympathy for the victims of Roman blood sports, we show ourselves the
heirs, not of the Caesars, but of the early church. I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints
and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. So wrote Saint John in Revelation, the last book of the
New Testament, sometime during the late first century AD. John's vision ranks as an apocalypse,
a parting of the curtain that veiled from mortal gaze events that were yet to come.
But it is also the most vivid, the most corresponding, the most influential attack on imperialism
ever written. The woman beheld by John was a whore, dressed in purple, bedecked with extravagant
jewellery, and sitting on a scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns. Babylon was her name,
and she ranked as the mother of all the world's depravities and abominations.
An angel, speaking to the narrator, revealed the true identity of this monstrous prostitute,
the great city which has dominion over the kings of the earth.
In Revelation, the power and the wealth of the world's capital serve only to
heighten the relish John feels at the spectacle of her ruin. A voice from heaven informs him that
in a time to come, the kings of the earth will weep and wail when they watch her burn, and
merchants will mourn. A lass, a lass for the great city, that was clothed in fine linen,
in purple and scarlet, bedecked with gold, with jewels, and with pearls. In one hour,
all this wealth has been laid waste. Here, incubated by Rome's empire,
was a prophecy of her downfall that was fated always to be the shadow of the memories of her
greatness. Just as it was the age of Hadrian, and of his successor Antoninus Pius, the Gibbon
hailed for having offered the world its fairest prospect of universal peace. So it was the spectacle

of barefooted friars singing vespers in a pagan temple in the very heart of Rome,
that first prompted him to muse on her decline and fall. The ancient gods were not alone in
having been humbled by Christ. Also brought low were the Caesars who had ruled the empire at its
greatest extent. Today, in Rome, neither Hadrian's mausoleum nor the pawns Ilius commemorate the
man who built them. They bear witness instead on the summit of the mausoleum to the appearance
of
the Archangel Michael, who in Revelation is described as throwing down Satan to the earth.
Meanwhile, on the triumphal column raised by Trajan, Hadrian's predecessor, and the most
fated of all Rome's emperors, it is not Trajan himself who stands there, but Saint Peter,
a humble fisherman. Christ had foretold all of it, so the last will be first and the first last.
The notion that this was to be viewed as a positive, as a consummation devoutly to be wished,
would have appeared incomprehensible to Trajan. To the Roman elite in this period,
the beliefs and teachings of Christians were only dimly a matter of concern.
They were of faint and only occasionally noted presence in the empire's urban fabric,
like Mesozoic mammals in an ecosystem dominated by dinosaurs. Yet just as mammals were
destined
in the long run to inherit the earth, so too were the Christians. Indeed, so total was the
revolution in values brought about by their triumph, and so utterly have we in the west come
to take them for granted, that it can be hard for us today to appreciate just how profoundly
influenced by them many of our assumptions remain. If Europeans and Americans have always
looked back to Rome with admiration, then so also has that admiration, even during the heyday of
Western imperialism, been clouded by suspicion. Christians, when they annexed the lands of other
peoples, did so as the followers of a provincial who had been tortured to death on the orders of an
imperial administrator. To take on the role of Pontius Pilate, then, might not sit readily or easily
with their consciences. Enthusiasm for decolonization is a very Western phenomenon.
The Romans, in their own displays of colonial violence, were more innocent. To them,
a cross served not as it did for Christians, as an emblem of the triumph of the tortured over the
torturer, but rather the opposite, of the right they claimed for themselves to suppress insurrection
as brutally and uncompromisingly as they pleased. No feelings of guilt shadowed their callousness.
It was Christianity that first instilled those. Today, although church attendance in the west
may not be what it used to be, our society remains as stamped as it ever was by the legacy of the
early Christians' hostility to the whore of Babylon. Historians of classical antiquity
bear its imprint no less than everybody else. Certainly, enthusiasm for empire tends not
to be a feature of contemporary classics departments. The martial qualities the Romans
valued, which enabled them both to conquer and to uphold their immense imperium,
to reap vast harvests of slaves, and to celebrate blood sports as entertainment,
are rarely the toast of scholars in universities today.
It is one of the great paradoxes of ancient history, then, that the most influential legacy
of the Pax Romana should have been a movement so revolutionary in its ultimate effects,
that today it requires a huge effort for us, even to begin to comprehend the world
as the Romans comprehended it. For now, we see through a glass, darkly. Christianity, however,
is not alone in having endured from the first and second centuries AD as a living tradition,
nor is it the most radical in its hostility to the memory of Roman imperialism.
In due course, after all, Caesar's came to power who were themselves Christian,

and the empire that previously had been drunk on the blood of the saints and the martyrs,
was reconsecrated to Christ. Even though Trajan, in the long run, did come to fall,
the replacement of his statue on the summit of his triumphal column in Rome with one of
St. Peter signalled no condemnation of the emperor's memory. Just as the Romans themselves
had hailed him as optimus princeps, the best of emperors, so did medieval Christians admire him
almost as one of their own. Indeed, prompted by anxieties as to the fate of his soul,
a remarkable story about him came to be told. It was claimed that a particularly saintly pope,
impressed by the details of Trajan's life, distraught that such a paragon of virtue
should have failed to gain entry to heaven and moved to plead for his salvation, went to St.
Peter's church, and wept floods of tears as was his custom, until he gained at last by divine
revelation the assurance that his prayers were answered, seeing that he had never presumed to
ask this for any other pagan. This was why Dante, in his great poem The Divine Comedy,
felt able to place Trajan in paradise. It was not any Christians, however,
who speculated about the fate after death of Caesars who had ruled during the empire's pomp,
so too did Jews, not for them any fretting over the fate of emperor's souls.
If rabbis could barely utter the name of Hadrian without cursing him,
may his bones rot, then it was an earlier Caesar who attracted the most unsettling traditions.
Titus, who had ruled briefly between AD 79 and 81, and was the second of a dynasty called the
Flavians, had merited terrible punishment. A gnat, the smallest of God's creatures, had flown into
his nose and entered his brain. There, for seven years, it had buzzed incessantly. When at last
Titus died and physicians opened his skull, they found that the gnat had grown to become a creature
like a sparrow with a beak of brass and claws of iron. The emperor's sufferings, meanwhile,
were not at an end. Nor would they ever be, for in hell, his reconstituted body
was fated every day to be burned to ashes.
What had been Titus' crime? In AD 70, four years after the Jews had risen in revolt against Rome,
an army under his command had captured the holiest building in the Jewish world,
the Temple of Jerusalem, and put it to the torch. Six decades later, Hadrian rubbed salt into Jewish
wounds by ordering a pagan temple built on the site. Once again, the Jews rose in revolt.
Once again, the Romans crushed them. This time, the work of pacification was deproved decisive.
Jerusalem was rebuilt as a Roman city. The name of the Jewish homeland, Judea, was changed to
Palestine. The Jews, so a Christian scholar gloated, are the only people in the world to have been
banished from their own metropolis. They had become a nation in exile.
The impact of these fateful developments still reverberates today.
The great rock where the Temple once stood is now a site sacred to Muslims as well as to Jews,
surmounted as it is by the first masterpiece of Islamic architecture,
the Dome of the Rock, and Islam's third holiest mosque.
It ranks in consequence as a flashpoint as dangerous as any in the world.
Meanwhile, Israel, a Jewish state established in what was once Judea,
has always drawn on the memory of the wars against Rome to consolidate its sense of national
identity.
Masada, a mountain south of Jerusalem where, sometime in the early 70s AD,
almost a thousand Jewish men, women, and children were reported to have taken their own lives
rather
than surrender to the Romans, has become an emblem for Israelis of the courage and resolve that

they
too, as a people surrounded by enemies, feel summoned to show.
Such a sense of self-identification is founded upon a key principle,
that Israel does indeed stand in a line of descent from the Judean state that was first
conquered and then obliterated by Rome. When, in 1960, recently discovered letters from the
leader of the Jewish revolt against Hadrian were shown to Yitzhak Benzvi, the president of Israel,
they were described to him as dispatches written or dictated by the last president.
A joke, but not entirely a joke. The risk of anachronism in assuming that the inhabitants
of the Roman province of Judea were Jews in the sense that we use the word today is very great,
so great, in fact, that I have opted not to take it. Just as the inheritance of Christian tradition
can operate as a smoke screen, obscuring for us the contours of the Roman Empire in its heyday,
so too can the inheritance of Jewish tradition. Much that makes what today we call Judaism
distinctive, the role played by rabbis, synagogues, the Talmud, constitutes less a preservation
of what had existed before the wars against the Romans than as an adaptation to its loss.
Prior to the final destruction of their homeland by Hadrian, the Udeoi, as the Greeks called the
inhabitants of Judea, ranked as a people, an ethnos, much like any other. Yes, they might appear
eccentric, but so did many other peoples. They were certainly not seen as belonging to a religion
called Judaism. For both words, which derived from specifically Christian theological propositions,
would have meant nothing to the Romans, nor to the Greeks, nor to the Jews themselves.
Just as the inhabitants of Athens were Athenians and of Egypt Egyptians,
so it is most accurate, perhaps, to term the inhabitants of Judea, Judeans.
The Roman Empire in its heyday was a world very different from ours,
and it is perilous to write about it in a language such as English,
one that has been shaped and weathered by over a millennium of Christian assumptions,
without being alert to just how treacherous a medium it can potentially be.
Just as I have sought to be true to the spirit in which the Colosseum was built,
by calling it in my narrative the Flavian Amphitheatre, this having been its original name,
so also have I sought to guard against more insidious anachronisms,
perspectives and assumptions that would have been incomprehensible to the people who were the
protagonists of this book. Roman attitudes towards dimensions of experience that we might be
tempted
to view as universal, dimensions of morality, or sexuality, or identity, were, to our way of
thinking, radically strange and unsettling. So unsettling indeed that some have preferred
not even to recognize them as such. My goal in writing PACs has been, at all times,
to show the inhabitants of the Roman world the respect due to all ancient peoples,
by attempting to understand them not on our terms, but on their own, in all their ambivalence,
their complexity, and their contradictions.
Anyone attempting to fulfill such an ambition confronts an obvious challenge.
When, in 1960, letters from the dying days of the revolt against Hadrian were discovered in a cave
in the Judean desert, the excitement they generated was not due solely to Israeli patriotism.
The find was stunning because it helped to fill, however incompletely,
a yawning gap in the historical record. The conflict, momentous though it may have been,
had left behind few written sources. While there are scraps of detail to be garnered from
inscriptions,

or from coins, or from the much later, and transparently tendentious,
writings of rabbis and church fathers, the only narratives to have survived are sketchy in the extreme. Historians and archaeologists, over the past few decades, have sifted the rubble of the evidence to heroic effect, and yet still, despite the recent publication of a number of studies of the war, it has proven impossible to arrive at anything more than the barest outline of its course.
The myths told about the Judean death struggle against Hadrian
remained far more vivid than any narrative of it that a historian can hope to write.
True, there are other conflicts that we know even less about.
There was an uprising in Britain during Hadrian's reign, for instance,
that one Roman writer explicitly compared to the war in Judea, and which presumably contributed to the emperor's decision to build his famous wall, but we know little more about it than that.
Conversely, the narrative that can be told of the revolt of the Judeans against Hadrian
is made to seem all the more ghostly by the fact that the original Judean uprising,
the one that culminated in the destruction of the temple and the siege of Masada,
left behind what ranks by the standards of ancient history as quite prodigious quantities of evidence.
We have biographies of the two Flavians, Titus and his father Vespasian,
who commanded the legions in the conflict. We have a scabrous survey by Tacitus,
the greatest of all Roman historians, of everything that made the Judeans appear peculiar to their neighbors. We have coins and inscriptions and freezes. Above all, we have a detailed narrative account of the revolt and its causes, written not by a Roman, but by a Judean, and a Judean,
what is more, who played a significant role in the conflict. Josephus' Judean War is one of the supreme works of history to have survived from antiquity, and yet remarkably, it is not the only narrative account of those fateful years that we have. Tacitus wrote one as well, albeit focused
not on the Judean revolt, but on the civil war that was simultaneously convulsing the Roman world and which saw, in the year AD69, no fewer than four Caesars rule in succession.
To tell the story of the period, then, is always to be alert to how the evidence for Roman history, sometimes blazing bright, sometimes non-existent, is a variable thing. The world portrayed in this book is illuminated much as a coastline at night might be illuminated by an immense battery of lighthouses, this way and that there beams sweep in irregular and untrustworthy patterns.
Sometimes a stretch of rocks may be flooded by brilliant light, sometimes the scene may be abruptly cast into darkness, entire reaches of the shoreline may never be illuminated at all.
So it is with the decades between the first Judean revolt and the second, between the year of the four emperors and the accession of Antoninus Pius. I emphasise this not to alarm the listener,
but rather to explain the balance and the rhythms of the book. The range and focus of my narrative, the degree to which it moves from setting to setting and zooms in and out, is determined
above all by the nature of the available source material and archaeological evidence.
We may lack records for entire years at a time, but we can reconstruct the events of one particular year, the fateful one of AD69, month by month and often day by day. We may lack histories that focus
on the doings of town councillors or women or businessmen or slaves, but we have been left
the remains of Pompeii and Herculaneum, in which the ghosts of many such people still haunt the streets.
We may lack a biography of Trajan that most admired of all the Caesars, but we do have detailed accounts of what was happening under his rule in a very particular province. This is a story that

begins and ends in Rome, but is about very much more than Rome. It is a story that embraces the entire Roman world and beyond. Although it has been very much been written to stand alone, Pax is the third in a series of histories. The first, Rubicon, tells the story of Julius Caesar and his age, the second, dynasty, that of Augustus, Rome's first emperor and the line of rulers who claim descent from him. Pax opens at a key moment in history, the suicide in AD68 of Nero, Augustus'
last male descendant. With his death, Rome's first dynasty of autocrats became extinct.
What was to replace it? The attempt to answer this question brought a long century of civil peace to an end. In AD69, four men in succession ruled as emperor. Soldiers slaughtered one another
in the streets of Rome, and the capital's greatest temple was consumed by fire. The year of the four emperors served as a brutal reminder to the Roman people that all their greatness, all their prosperity, might be threatened by the very quality that had originally won them their empire and enabled them to ensure its security, their aptitude for killing. The capacity of the legions to exercise extreme violence was the necessary precondition of the Pax Romana. This is why, in a book about the longest sustained period of peace that the Mediterranean has ever enjoyed, the context should be provided by war.
A child alive when Nero committed suicide might well have attended the obsequies of Hadrian, the riots surrounding his death. The decades separating the two emperors witnessed a succession of episodes so dramatic that their fame endures to this day, the siege and destruction of Jerusalem, the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, the inauguration of the Colosseum.
Conflicts, even once the mass of the Roman world had been restored to order following the year of the four emperors, still flared in Britain, along the Danube, in Judea. The legions carried their arms to the Persian Gulf. The Romans remained who they had always been, the heroes of a great drama marked by incomparable feats and ordeals. Yet most momentous of all was a process of change
that, over the course of the period covered by this book, served forever to transform what was meant by the name Roman. By the time Hadrian died, it had come to signify in the words of one contemporary, a man close enough to the emperor to have swapped poetic witticisms with him, less a single people than the entirety of the human race. The empire was the wealthiest, the most formidable, the most terrifying state that had ever existed, a state that repeatedly, over the course of the decades described in packs, made a show of its invincibility so that even its enemies came to believe it could never be defeated. I have sought to portray the Romans in their imperial heyday, not as our contemporaries, not as straw men, either to be emulated or condemned,
but as a people who command our fascination, above all, by virtue of being different, unnervingly, compellingly different.