Review

Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome. Climate, Disease and the End of an Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 440 pp. ISBN: 978-0691166834, £27.95 (hbk).

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The Fate of Rome boldly grasps one of the big questions of the day. What part did environmental factors play in shaping the long-term history of human societies? Ancient historians have wondered before about the disruptive impact of catastrophes (such as volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, plagues) and also about slower moving pressures, especially climate change, with its associated impacts on rainfall, on growing seasons, on sea-level changes and so on the frequency of droughts and floods. Prehistorians have become adept at incorporating environmental factors into accounts of human evolution and the spread and contraction of the range of various early human species. History, with its finer chronology and more detailed record of human activity, poses distinct challenges (Sessa 2019). There have been many studies of particular incidents or disasters. Now the prospect of a more systematic account is offered by a mass of new evidence from the geo- and life sciences. Yet communication between those disciplines and our own is difficult. Harper has risen to this challenge and for this reason alone his book is an important one.

The book has already been both very successful and quite controversial. Some of the controversy revolves around details of the scientific data, and Harper's use of them. I am not qualified to assess all these fields, but readers may refer to a detailed multi-authored evaluation in the form of three linked thematic papers (Haldon *et al.* 2018). This review is focused more on Harper's historiographical project.

The first thing to say is that it is a good read. Harper writes with enthusiasm and panache and he has a grand story to tell, the slow collapse of the Roman Empire from the reign of Hadrian to the Arab Conquests. The scope is more or less that of Peter Brown's (1971) classic *The World of Late*

Antiquity but the mood music is Gibbonian. Chapter 2 “The Happiest Age” establishes the second century as a benchmark of prosperity and security but Harper has already told us it was built on “contingent and parlous environmental foundations” (p.15)¹ and (with a dramatic twist) that the Romans had no idea of the peril they were in. Over Chapters 3-7 the empire is repeatedly struck by disasters emanating from the natural world. Chapter 3 deals with the Antonine Plague; Chapter 4 with the Third Century Crisis, in which climate change and the Cyprian Plague take centre stage; Chapter 5 with the fourth century recovery (although the climate was now unpredictable, and in the 350s and 360s created a mega-drought that kicked off Hunnic migrations and ultimately the fall of the West). Chapter 6 relates the Justinianic Plague; and Chapter 7 a volcanically forced Late Antique Little Ice Age. The narrative is chronological, its organization episodic. The empire reels under one Malthusian blow after another until, at last weakened, it crumbles before its enemies (at least in the West).

The shape of the narrative, and its periodization, are familiar. What Harper has added is a new level of causation. The main story arc is the shift from the Roman Climate Optimum of the first centuries CE to a less stable climatic regime to a little Ice Age in which something as expensive and complicated as the Roman Empire was no longer sustainable. This schema builds on a body of very recent multi-disciplinary work (e.g. McCormick *et al.* 2012) although it is not unchallenged (Haldon *et al.* 2018). Volcanic and seismological activity is overlaid on this pattern, especially in the sixth century, causing short-term catastrophes. The third major component is disease, and here Harper follows a line of argument established by William McNeill in *Plagues and Peoples* (1976) in which progressive demographic growth, population concentration and connections between previously isolated disease pools created a new opportunities for the rapid spread of epidemic disease. Harper has refined this picture, taking into account a mass of new research especially on plague, its vectors and its evolution, but essentially treats the growing exchange of pathogens across Eurasia as a parallel threat to the empire and its population, operating alongside climate change.

One of the many impressive features of *The Fate of Rome* is the level of detail with which Harper has engaged with the natural sciences. His credentials as an historian of late antiquity are impeccable following his much admired study of late antique slavery (Harper 2011) and his monograph on the impact of Christianity on sexual morality (Harper 2013). This comes to the fore in brilliant evocations of ancient trade routes, of the text of urban social life, and of the excitement of imperial ceremonial. Writing the *Fate of Rome* has taken him into a vast range of other fields from epidemiology to climate science, and he has immersed himself in studies of disease

transmission from animals to humans and between humans, in the science of the impact of volcanic eruptions on weather systems, in parasitology, disease ecology and much else. This sort of effort is probably as much as can be expected of any lone scholar approach to a subject such as this one. Harper is good too, on the whole, in explaining their results to those without a scientific background. The difficulty of this work of translation should not be underestimated.

Harper has, however, made the task even harder for himself by aiming this book at the wider public. In effect he has set out not just to correlate a history of late antiquity with environmental history, but also to present his synthesis in a form accessible to a wider public. This is a tall order, and at times the strain is visible.

The difficulties of writing ancient history for a broad public are well known. What engages most are personalities and anecdotes, ideally presented in the words of the original actors and as vignettes that are easy to visualize. Harper is good at this. Aelius Aristides, Galen, Tertullian, Constantine, Claudian, Gregory the Great and others have walk on parts. One difficulty, however, is that few of them had read the script. For a history of warfare, ancient testimony about war and battles is easy to find, but ancient writers have nothing reliable to say about climate change, rodent vectors, or the El Niño effect. It was catastrophes that caught their attention: episodes of plague, eruptions, earthquakes and tsunamis. But as the long debate on the plague at Athens shows, ancient testimony cannot usually answer questions we want to know the answers to. Accounts of symptoms are vague, numbers are unreliable, the focus is always local when we want to know the bigger picture. Of the really big secular changes, such as global temperatures and the mingling of disease pools, ancient witnesses were unaware. It is tempting – and Harper sometimes succumbs, as several reviewers have noted – to give odd apocalyptic statements more credibility than they deserve (Esmonde Cleary 2018; Haldon *et al.* 2018; Sessa 2019).

A second difficulty is that a gripping narrative is slowed, sometimes fatally, by expressions of uncertainty. And much remains uncertain about (for example) the localized impacts of climate change, the death toll from various epidemics, the long-term impact of moments of high mortality on economic performance. To make the narrative flow, Harper has on occasion to be a bit more definite than the science really allows. The idea that two decades of drought was “the cause” of the Hunnic migrations is at best a hypothesis (and a simplifying one, since all migrations derive from a range of factors and impulses). The claim that it was the third century crisis that “opened the door to the uncanny growth of a marginal religious movement known as Christianity” (p. 153) will also surprise some readers. A disease

driven history of religions has yet to be worked out for antiquity, if indeed a monocausal account is really ideal. As for the impact of disease we need to know more about resilience and recovery times: some epidemics notoriously deliver short-term economic boosts. Harper touches on this and on the fascinating question of why some plagues “go away” but the speed of his exposition does not allow full discussion.

How about the main argument? A central thread is that environmental factors drove both structural change (population dynamics, levels of urbanization and so on) and events. Humans for Harper are mostly patients not agents. At first sight this might seem a reasonable proposition, as no-one will claim that human impact on the environment in the Roman period was equivalent to its impact today. On the other hand, prehistorians already document the impact of humans on Pleistocene animals and plants, while some proponents of a long Anthropocene would like to take it back at least to the origins of farming. Should we be happy with seeing antiquity as a period in which humans are subjected to environmental pressures in a way they were not in prehistory and are not today? At times Harper does note how a particular feature of late antique society contributed to disasters, especially in relation to contagion. But admitting the contingency of vulnerability is not quite the same as a fully multi-causal account (Sessa 2019).

I suspect one reason that Harper has chosen this approach is that he has begun with a very traditional narrative of 200–700 CE, one generated from historical sources with a periodization barely shaped by archaeology let alone the natural sciences. An environmental history of classical antiquity might have a different shape if it started from agriculture, diminishing biodiversity, population dynamics and inter-species relations. Harper is explicit about this. He is drawing on new science to answer old historical questions (Marx *et al.* 2018). Less obviously he is quite happy to write the story in terms of “humanity” and “nature” as if the two are obvious opposites. A yet more radical approach would be to accept our species as part of a permanently chaotic natural world. But treating the Roman Empire simply as an arbitrarily demarcated field of space-time within which these wider dynamics are unusually visible was not Harper’s project: book reviews should stick to the book in front of them, and not ask for a different one.

The *Fate of Rome* will not be the last book on this subject. But it is one of the few syntheses yet attempted at this scale, and is remarkable as the work of a single scholar. The environmental history of antiquity is no longer a niche interest. The discipline has a good deal to thank Harper for.

Note

1. Unspecified parenthetical referencing is intended from Harper (2017).

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