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Disasters: Ancient Mediterranean

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# The Plague of Justinian

In Agathias's *Histories*, Agathias writes that Roman soldiers would "tumble over backwards foaming at the mouth and with [their] eyes horribly distorted" (Rosen 286), their leader himself succumbing to maniacal raving (286). Such were the effects of Justinian's Plague. The hardened soldiers were wiped out along with the old and young, and the plague even had the audacity to try to slay Emperor Justinian. The massive disaster took advantage of an already-vulnerable empire and—by bringing the empire to its knees—affected its culture and structure, perpetuating the vulnerability and luring both internal and external forces to take advantage of new opportunities to gain power.

Before the analysis of the plague's societal effects, it is necessary to define the terms disaster and hazard.

A disaster is the combination of one or more unexpected "destructive agent[s]" (Oliver-Smith and Susanna 4)—or hazards—and a sufficient amount of social vulnerability that leaves behind a society that, although devastated, may take advantage of the decimation for social transformation (Toner 13). This definition considers the disaster in two contexts: The disaster's cause—the hazard—and the effects. The human element necessary for a natural event to be able to *create* the disaster in the first place is considered, and the disaster's effects are implied in the proposal that a society can benefit from the aftermath of the disaster.

A hazard is the combination of human and/or environmental conditions (Oliver-Smith and Susanna 4) that creates a force with the potential for comprehensive damage (4) that can affect a community both physically and mentally. To accurately define a hazard, mentioning both humans' *and* nature's ability to create hazards is an essentiality. In addition, the idea that a society is affected in a comprehensive fashion—with all areas of life affected—legitimizes this definition.

This piece will briefly discuss the Plague of Justinian and subsequent plague cycles, atrocities that wiped out entire cities and severely weakened the Empire, which—until the onset of the 'demon,' or *Y. pestis* bacterium—was at its height in power (Rosen 3). The demon affected many cities across the empire, leaving it in a position of frailty that led to extreme threats from a myriad of forces. The Plague of Justinian primarily occurred between 541 to 542 AD., killing at least twenty-five million people and "[depressing] birth rates for generations" (Rosen 3). *Y. pestis* curtailed the emperor's power in multiple ways, returning repeatedly until his death in 565 AD. (311) and beyond.

*Y. pestis* and human traveling comprise the hazards. As a product of the natural environment, *Y. pestis* initially found a home in the rat populations. The demon spread, and human interactions—trading and sailing throughout the Empire—allowed rats to sail around the Mediterranean (Rosen 185), spreading *Y. pestis* in their wake. Rats are not "travelers by choice" (186)—throughout their lives, the farthest a normal rat travels is two-hundred meters (186)—and thus without humans, the hazard would not have transformed into such a devastating force. Additionally, the *Y. pestis* hazard physically sapped the strength from the people or wiped them out entirely, and it influenced the minds of those under imperial rule and invaders alike.

This empire-wide disaster is the combination of the two hazards and a scientifically-ignorant—and thus vulnerable—Roman society. The Plague of Justinian brought Justinian's empire close to annihilation repeatedly. The demon's destruction, however, benefited certain individuals and institutions and acted as a catalyst for societal change.

Before the onset of the plague, Justinian's armies had secured the entire western Mediterranean (Rosen 3). After the demon ravaged Justinian's empire, his armies were reduced to one-third of their original size (Rosen 309), leaving a weakened Justinian in the crosshairs of surrounding invaders. From this fragility, however, came remarkable military ingenuity and resilience.

Three massive Kotrigur armies invaded Justinian's empire in 558, and one descended upon Constantinople itself (Rosen 293). Justinian had two military forces to repel them: His palace guards, and the retired General Belisarius (293). Luckily, General Belisarius was one of the most renowned generals of his age, and he compensated for the plague's dwindling of the military ranks by devising an archery-based defense that eliminated four-hundred Kotrigurs before they were able to begin a siege (294). They promptly retreated from the plague-stricken city, ensuring General Belisarius's legacy as a strategist who could utilize the fewest soldiers in the most effective fashion possible (294).

Emperor Justinian once professed that his empire was delivered by "'His Divine Majesty'" (Rosen 69). As a devout Catholic, spreading Christianity and God was at the forefront of his agenda. Unfortunately, those who lived during and after his rule did not see God accordingly; after *Y. pestis* killed Pope Pelagius and Pope Gregory the Great (313), cultural perceptions of religion's legitimacy radically changed. A mental and spiritual crisis emerged, shaking long-held beliefs about God's wishes for the Roman people. For the Romans, it began to

seem as if "God had forsaken the empire" (Rosen 313). A culture that had relied on the gods'—or God's—favor for generations suddenly found itself wondering whether God truly remained allied with them any longer.

Through its destruction, *Y. pestis* was able to disclose the inner-workings of imperial Roman society. As he neared death, Justinian's empire was much larger than the one he inherited, yet it was more fragile than ever; in addition to external threats, forces within the empire clashed with each other in power struggles. Throughout most of his reign, Justinian successfully retained control over Roman religious institutions (Rosen 309). After the plague weakened his power, however, tension blossomed between Justinian and the Bishop of Rome and other bishops across the empire, who—as did many religious leaders of the time—found it necessary to struggle with imperial officials to consolidate power for themselves (309). During Justinian's reign, it is thus evident that religious figures were slightly below the emperor in social stature. Additionally, those of the Monophysite and Catholic religions clashed more than ever as they sought dominance in an empire that was—in a sense—starting over after years of disaster (309). The emperor himself was deeply affected by the demon; after having survived *Y. pestis* twenty-three years earlier, Justinian believed that he was immortal "even more[so] than most autocrats" (311). Unfortunately for the Roman Empire, this convinced him that naming a successor would be useless. While Justinian's nephew Justin did succeed him, it is unknown whether Justinian had ever truly named him, as only one witness—the Praepositus of the Sacred Bedchamber—heard the decree, raising concerns about the new emperor's legitimacy.

The Plague of Justinian placed a fragile Roman empire in the crosshairs of foreign enemies eager to see its destruction. It changed religious beliefs and disrupted the empire's political and religious climate, further weakening the stability of Justinian's empire.

Works Cited

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