

BOOK REVIEW

Roman Disasters. By JERRY TONER. Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013. Pp. ix + 220. Hardcover, \$25.00. ISBN: 978-0-7456-5102-6.

When this book reached me around the middle of June, I recalled that, in the fall of 2000, I had arranged a panel for the Southern Section of CAMWS meeting on “Roman Military Disasters and Their Consequences,” consisting of four papers, which were published in *The Classical World* 96 (2003) 363–406. But the present volume treats sparingly manmade disasters, largely in warfare, such as the Romans’ terrible defeats at Cannae, in the Teutoburg Forest, and at Adrianople.

Its subject is rather essentially those calamities caused by Mother Nature: volcanic eruptions, flooding, hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, earthquakes. The book’s arrival was very timely, alas. There were daily reports of the horrendous flooding in northern Europe. Not long before, tornadoes had leveled large sections of central Oklahoma. Forest fires were devastating parts of California and Colorado.

Every classicist will think immediately of the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79. We may not recall that there had been an earthquake in Pompeii seventeen years before, nor should one forget the seemingly continuous eruptions of Mt. Etna and the horrendous earthquake at Messina in 1908.

It is disasters such as these which are the prime subject of Toner’s book. There are two main themes: how did the Romans respond to these overwhelming disasters and what lessons, if any, the people drew from them or tried to explain them in some rational manner. In our day we have splendid communications, heavy equipment to attempt to give immediate succor, and trained dogs which can find and rescue buried people. But, all in all, we have not advanced very far from the time of the Romans. We may anticipate an earthquake or predict a tsunami, but we cannot forestall them.

Toner’s book is the first in my memory which treats such a huge range of disasters. I quote here from page 10 his subjects:

natural hazards:

atmospheric: rain, snow, hurricane

hydrological: floods, drought
 geological: earthquakes, volcanoes, landslides
 biological: epidemic diseases, blight, plagues of insects, forest fires
 technological hazards
 fire, hazardous materials, destructive processes, structural failure, mechanical devices, organizational failure
 violence:
 war, rebellion, assault, ethnic cleansing

Perhaps the Roman disasters which most readily come to a reader's mind are the collapse of the amphitheater in Fidenae in 26, followed by a huge fire on the Caelian Hill (Tacitus *Ann.* 4,62-4), the earthquake at Pompeii and eruption of Vesuvius, in 62 and 79, and the great fire at Rome in 64, which may have been set at Nero's instigation. The emperor Titus' short reign was marked by this eruption and another massive fire in Rome. Even the emperor could not do much against them; human capabilities were too frail ("Oh Gertrude, Gertrude! When sorrows come, they come not single spies, But in battalions" [*Hamlet*, IV 1])

When a disaster struck in antiquity, it was almost impossible for help to arrive from any distance, save for the delivery of food. This was the case into the nineteenth century, until the invention of the railroad. The victims did the best they could, fear and panic generally reigned, but one could do little more than hope and pray. The division of society into its various strata could help, because the aristocracy had private resources which they could tap, if they so wished.

It was easier to find blame in military disasters. In ad 9, the disaster in the Teutoburg Forest was irrevocably linked with Quinctilius Varus, and to a large degree quite appropriately. Yet some of the blame must fall on Augustus himself. Had he appointed to the legateship of Germany an experienced soldier like Caecina, history might well have been different.

But conjecture can never lead to an answer, why some disaster occurred. Religion was most often invoked. In the first century ad and later, the Christians could argue that God had caused A or B to punish the remaining pagans; conversely, the pagans could claim that the disaster came because the Christians had abandoned the ancient religion. But none of this is satisfactory.

Discussion of the consequences of disasters is largely psychological and sociological. The last two chapters, "The Psychological Impact" and "Roman Disasters in Context," recapitulate the arguments which Toner has presented. And a very good job he has done!

The book's publication is almost foolproof. I offer here a few suggestions and amendments. On page 18, eighth line from the bottom, use of the noun "vice" for "vise" befuddled me; is this a British usage? In the first paragraph on the next page, the Teutoburg forest is located in "what is now southern Germany." Not so; if one accepts Kalkriese as the battle site, it will be well into the northern part of the country, northeast of Osnabrück. On 143, the Arch of Gallienus deserves mention.

This is fine and informative book, for which the author deserves great praise. The subject is sad and gloomy, and the reader will not be very cheerful as he/she works through it. But the reader will know much more about Roman disasters at the end. *Bene factum!*

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