Harper (K.). *The Fate of Rome. Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire*. Pp. xvi + 417, figs, ills, maps. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017. Cased, £27.95, US\$35. ISBN: 978-0-691-16683-4.

‘The magnitude of these biological catastrophes is almost incomprehensible. The least of the three pandemics ... was probably the mortality known as the Antonine Plague. We will argue that it carried off perhaps seven million victims. This is considerably lower than some estimates. But the bloodiest day of battle in imperial history was the rout of the Romans at Adrianople, when a desperate force of Gothic invaders overran the main body of the eastern field army. At most twenty thousand Roman lives were lost on that baleful day, and while it magnified the problem that these were soldiers, the lesson of the comparison is all the same: Germs are far deadlier than Germans’ (p. 18).

Like a good Tarantino film, Kyle Harper’s latest monograph is both very satisfying and extremely quotable. Harper has shown himself a productive polymath in the field of Late Antiquity, by producing three landmark studies on widely diverging subjects in quick succession: *Slavery in the Late Roman World* (CUP 2011), *The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality* (HUP 2013) and now *The Fate of Rome*. For those among us who have been following the debate on the volatile cocktail formerly known as The Fall of Rome, it is refreshing to see the subject tackled from a genuinely new perspective: environmental history.

Harper smoothly guides the reader through the ecological transformation of the Roman world in seven chapters. Ice cores, lake deposits, marine sediments, tree rings and human bones provide the reader with a catalogue of natural sources, aligned with literary accounts and archaeological data, to understand the complexities narrated. Starting in the Antonine era, Gibbon’s ‘Golden Age’, we learn how the Romans had been complicit in building the launch pad for the disease ecologies that were to haunt them soon. By conquering a world with different ecosystems as far apart as Britain and the Red Sea and connecting these through trade-routes with regions as remote as India, the Romans unwittingly opened Pandora’s box. Late Roman History could thus be called ‘the Age of Pandemic Disease’ (p. 18). Harper never advocates monocausal theories and his various environmental and climatological threads are interwoven with digressions on the Empire’s social, economic and institutional fabric. That way, the reader properly understands the raw havoc these great plagues and climate change wrought on the Mediterranean world and its European hinterland.

Every plague essentially followed four patterns: sudden demographic carnage, immediate religious outcry, swift economic crisis, and an eventual recalibration of the empire’s capacities. The Antonine Plague (probably caused by smallpox) was followed by an empire-wide appeal to an archaic Apollo and probably reduced the imperial population to Augustean levels. It also meant a setback for the Empire’s reserve-batteries: army recruitment dropped, the silver coinage was debased, and provincial elites needed to be recruited to shore up government. In short: ‘the Roman Empire’s efflorescence was clipped in bloom’ (p. 118). The Severan dynasty represented an Indian Summer for the empire, with a resurgent population and the last great spree of public monumental building activities in Rome. If Philip the Arab’s *ludi saecularis* in 248 CE put on the best possible face that Augustus himself would still have recognized, then the so-called Plague of Cyprian (probably a filovirus akin to modern Ebola)

meant nothing short but a grim overhaul of the empire's make-up. This time, demographic turmoil was followed by a genuine break-down: frontiers collapsed, the fiscal machinery unravelled, and the traditional polytheistic religions saw their foundations crack with cults like Christianity beginning to fill those gaps. Demographic recovery did follow, but population levels and cities were never really the same again. Once the climate started stabilizing again from 266 CE onwards, the statecraft of the stark soldier-emperors saved the empire from these centrifugal forces for another century-and-half (in the West) or three (in the East).

Harper is at his finest in deconstructing the actual impact of the sheer "military-fiscal death spiral" (p. 278) that Justinian's Plague (or *Yersinia Pestis* to be more precise) meant for the Empire. Contrary to the Antonine Plague or the Plague of Cyprian, the world's first true pandemic was not dependent on human transmitters but could reach every community inside the Empire (and beyond) where the black rat was able to claw its way in. Harper aptly dismantles the old adage that cities bled while the countryside was largely spared from this bubonic plague. In combination with the 'Late Antique Little Ice Age', whose chill in the 530s and 540s may have worked in lethal tandem with the plague, a demographic onslaught was unleashed. At the dawn of the seventh century, the empire's population had effectively been halved, cities had degenerated into stone husks, economic networks had become unravelled, governmental resources completely sapped, and Apocalyptic discourse dominated in both Christianity and Judaism. The Levant was ready to be taken over by the emerging Arab Caliphate - unscathed by the Plague just like other semi-nomadic societies - and the Byzantine "Dark Ages" were at hand.

Harper's *Fate of Rome* is an intellectual *tour de force*, combining prodigious scientific evidence with historical insight, and presented with superb prose. One simply cannot put this book down without learning something new. However, it is not flawless. Harper makes a very strong case for the *Roman Climate Optimum* creating the perfect environment for the Roman Republic's rapid expansion during the final two centuries BCE (p. 14). Yet unlike Virgil's manifest destiny, nature never exclusively favours one particular political entity. The very same favourable conditions that blessed Rome also blessed other major players. One immediately thinks of the Seleucids whose territories dwarfed the *Res Publica* and who were seemingly well-positioned to restore Alexander's Empire at the start of the *RCO*.

Similarly, scholars hoping to find environmental factors shedding new light on the dissolution of western Roman rule will probably be disappointed. Harper demonstrates that between c. 300-450 CE, the climate gently smiled on the Late Roman Empire again and no new plagues or natural disasters shook *Romania*... except for the Huns – "armed climate refugees on horseback" (p. 192). Mega droughts form the context for various Central-Asian tribes' trek to the West. The idea that the Huns' arrival caused "the peoples in front of it [to fall] like dominoes" [p. 195], and thus provide the kick-starter for the Imperial West's disintegration has become fashionable again. Yet this thesis probably has even more opponents than supporters. On a final minor note, this reviewer would argue that Stilicho's "crowning achievement as a battlefield commander" was not the battle of Verona in 402 (p. 160) - effectively a stalemate whence Alaric was able to retreat with sufficient forces – but the battle of Florence in 406, where he annihilated the main army of Radagaisus, that other Gothic *rex*.¹

¹ Wijnendaele, *JLA* 9 (1): 267-284.

If there is one takeaway from this book, then it is not only that the environment needs to be taken into consideration earnestly when explaining the massive transformations the Roman Empire endured in the aftermath of the Antonine, Cyprianic and Justinianic Plagues. It should also make us better appreciate the valiant efforts of the Illyrian soldier-emperors, and Justinian and his successors, in keeping the empire together as well as they did in such abysmal circumstances. Whether one agrees with Harper or not - and those dissenting are facing a barrage of scientific evidence - *The Fate of Rome* has the potential to bring about a paradigm shift in the field. Like Edward Luttwak's *Grand Strategy* or Walter Goffart's *The Techniques of Accommodation*, Harper has thrown down the gauntlet, and scholars will be debating the issue on his terms for what probably will be a long time to come. And in between all of it, there is an even more dire premonition we should still heed today:

What did Imperialism ever do for us?
It got us sick.

JEROEN W.P. WIJNENDAELE
Jeroen.wijnendaele@ugent.be
Ghent University