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Disaster and Human Dependency in Late Antiquity

Abstract:

The people of the late Roman Empire (ca. 250-700 CE) experienced their share of sudden, violent, and destructive environmental disasters (e.g., earthquakes, tsunamis, and epidemics) alongside climatic shifts that, in some areas, generated deleterious weather conditions, leading to periods of flooding or drought. And while the Romans were no strangers to warfare, inhabitants of the late Empire arguably experienced the catastrophic impacts of organized military action on a scale unknown to many previous generations. Many scholars use these and similar observations to fashion declinist narratives about Late Antiquity, which present a range of disasters as the “causes” of the empire’s collapse. This presentation offers a different set of interpretations. Rather than constructing a single grand narrative that explains what disasters “did” to the Empire, I present readings that center the perspectives of the late Romans who experienced them along with the many different environmental contexts in which they took place. Drawing on a range of evidence, my talk will present provisional answers to the following questions: How did disasters impact human relationships, whether in terms of strengthening established social networks or the severing of bonds? In what ways did they force individuals into new forms of dependent relationships through the exigencies of captivity, flight, and/or displacement? In conclusion, I will suggest that while existing connections and access to resources were paramount in the outcomes for disaster survivors (as we would expect), these outcomes nonetheless were often mediated by new structures of dependency that emerged from the explosion of the ransom market during Late Antiquity.

Bio:

Kristina Sessa (BA, Princeton University and PhD University of California at Berkeley) is a cultural historian of the Late Roman Empire, whose past work has explored topics like Roman episcopal authority, the domestic sphere and daily life. Her recent project on natural and anthropogenic disasters has moved her into the field of environmental history; she is particularly interested in the challenges of studying cultural and social responses to the physical world. She is presently Professor of History at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, and the co-editor-in-chief of *Studies in Late Antiquity*.