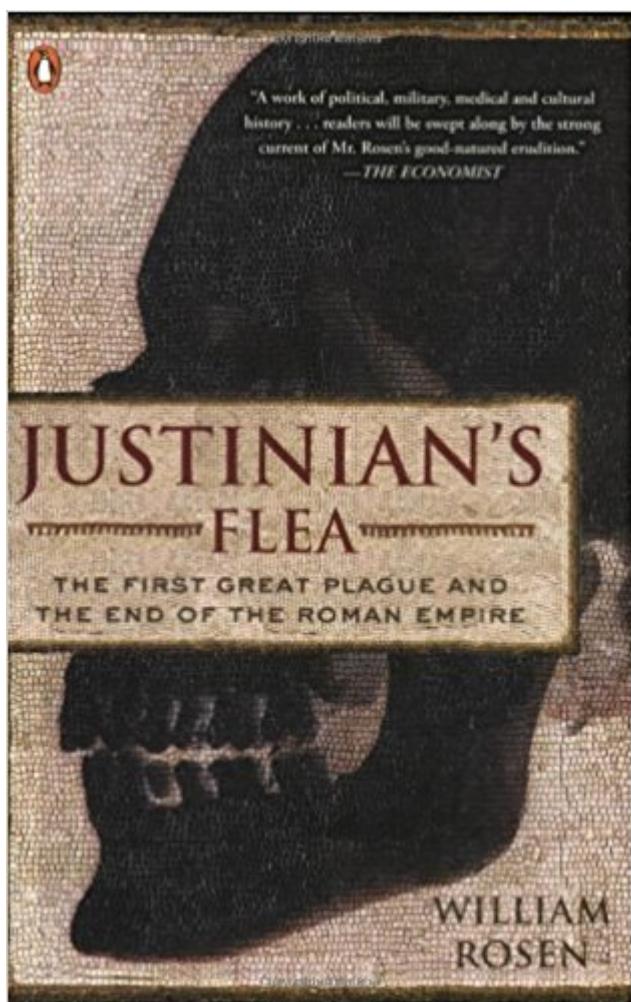


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# Justinian's Flea: The First Great Plague And The End Of The Roman Empire



## Synopsis

From the acclaimed author of *Miracle Cure* and *The Third Horseman*, the epic story of the collision between one of nature's smallest organisms and history's mightiest empire. During the golden age of the Roman Empire, Emperor Justinian reigned over a territory that stretched from Italy to North Africa. It was the zenith of his achievements and the last of them. In 542 AD, the bubonic plague struck. In weeks, the glorious classical world of Justinian had been plunged into the medieval and modern Europe was born. At its height, five thousand people died every day in Constantinople. Cities were completely depopulated. It was the first pandemic the world had ever known and it left its indelible mark: when the plague finally ended, more than 25 million people were dead. Weaving together history, microbiology, ecology, jurisprudence, theology, and epidemiology, *Justinian's Flea* is a unique and sweeping account of the little known event that changed the course of a continent.

## Book Information

Paperback: 384 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books; Reprint edition (July 29, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 014311381X

ISBN-13: 978-0143113812

Product Dimensions: 5.6 x 0.8 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.6 out of 5 stars 111 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #428,929 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #188 in Books > Textbooks > Medicine & Health Sciences > Medicine > Clinical > Infectious Diseases #219 in Books > Textbooks > Medicine & Health Sciences > Medicine > Special Topics > History #290 in Books > Medical Books > Medicine > Internal Medicine > Pathology > Diseases > Viral

## Customer Reviews

What might be called "microbial history" — the study of the impact of disease on human events — is a subject that has received great attention in recent years. Rosen's new book follows John Barry's *The Great Influenza* and John Kelly's *The Great Mortality*. An editor and publisher for more than a quarter century, Rosen absorbingly narrates the story of how the Byzantine Empire encountered the dangerous *Y. pestis* in A.D. 542 and suffered a bubonic plague pandemic foreshadowing its more famous successor eight centuries later. Killing 25 million people and depressing the birth rate and economic growth for many generations, this unfortunate collision

of bacterium and man would mark the end of antiquity and help usher in the Dark Ages. Rosen is particularly illuminating and imaginative on the "macro" aftereffects of the plague. Thus, the "shock of the plague" would remake the political map north of the Alps by drawing power away from the Mediterranean and Byzantine worlds toward what would become France, Germany and England. Specialist historians may certainly dislike the inevitable reductionism such a broad-brush approach entails, but readers of Collapse and Guns, Germs, and Steel, Jared Diamond's grand narratives, will find this a welcome addendum. (May 14) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Surveying the reign of Emperor Justinian of the Byzantine Empire during the years 527-65, Rosen enlists a range of topics from architecture to conquest to bubonic plague. The latter looms largest in his account, for it wreaked havoc in 542. Justinian's ambition to restore the Roman Empire, going great guns at the time under General Belisarius, came to a halt. The calamity's demographic consequences must have been substantial, too, if uncertain, and Rosen salts his text with speculations about the Byzantine seedlings of Europe's future nations. With more surety, Rosen relays eyewitness descriptions of the Justinian plague, with which he integrates the modern scientific understanding of *Yersinia pestis* and its carrier, the rat. Before the plague arrived in Constantinople, luckily for Justinian's historical reputation, he had already finished building the Hagia Sophia and codifying Roman law. Deeply steeped in the literature of late antiquity, Rosen wears his erudition lightly as he weaves interpretations into a fluid narrative of the era's geostrategic possibilities before the final onset of the Dark Ages. Gilbert TaylorCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Of all the books I've read about the Bubonic Plague, "Justinian's Flea" proved to be the most deft at weaving the history of Eastern Roman Empire with the ecological life cycle of the plague bacillus, as it mutated from a relatively harmless microbe to a demon that consumed at least twenty-five million human lives, beginning in the year 540 CE. I had assumed the sixth century pandemic originated somewhere in the Great Steppe that separated the Eastern Roman Empire from China, but this author makes the case that it actually originated in the "fertile African valleys between Lake Tana in the north and Lake Rudolf in the South...it would have had its choice of northward routes aboard its flea/rat hosts, either via the Red Sea, or up the Nile..." to the great port city of Alexandria. While waiting for the demon (the author's name for the plague bacillus) to appear, we are treated to a

history of the Eastern Roman Empire as it began to split away from the West and from Rome. One of this author's main sources is Procopius of Caesaria, the principal historian of the 6th century. He accompanied Justinian's great general, Belisarius on many of his campaigns and wrote of them in "Wars of Justinian." Procopius also published a salacious 'Secret History' which was rediscovered in the Vatican Library many centuries after it was written. This is the source for the Empress Theodora's early life 'on stage' including the infamous anecdote about her act with the geese. I never realized ancient history could be morphed into an x-rated movie! William Rosen also quotes extensively from "The Buildings of Justinian" by Procopius to describe the construction of the Hagia Sophia, the massive domed church that reigned as Christendom's largest cathedral for a millennium. It was finished in a little under six years, which is an astonishing feat when you realize that Europe's great gothic cathedrals such as Chartres took generations of labor to complete. The erection of Hagia Sophia's immense dome forms one of the most noteworthy sidebars in "Justinian's Flea." Back to the plague itself, and the author's interesting assertion as to why Justinian's plague showed up when it did: a drop in the average temperature, almost certainly caused by a volcanic eruption. According to Procopius, in the summer of 536 a mysterious cloud appeared over the Mediterranean basin: "The sun gave forth its light without brightness and it seemed exceedingly like the sun in eclipse, for the beams it shed were not clear." Modern research points to the Ilopango volcano in San Salvador as the probable culprit. What do cooler than usual temperatures have to do with the plague? "The narrow range [of optimal temperature] bracketed by flea activity and bacterial blocking had kept the disease confined to its East African focus for hundreds if not thousands of years." The plague-carrying flea is only active within a very narrow range of temperature: from about 59 - 68 degrees Fahrenheit. When Egypt cooled down, the plague-bearing fleas were able to migrate north to the great port city of Alexandria, and from there to the rest of the Mediterranean basin. In this book's epilogue, the author speculates on what might have been if Justinian's plague hadn't fatally weakened the Eastern Roman Empire, just as the European proto-states were forming and the Muslims were about to sweep out of Arabia and conquer all before them. It forms a fitting finale to this remarkable mixture of history and epidemiology. Highly recommended.

I was relieved to read cloud catcher 22's review for I have the same complaint with some additions. I have read with great interest about the fourteenth century's bubonic plague's ending feudalism and bringing about mass migration from countryside to cities and towns to find work. The days of the lords and their castles controlling the common man had come to an end. Now, I thought I would get

similar insight into the impact of the plague upon humanity in the sixth century. Not so, and very disappointing. I have a difficult time thinking that the author is an editor. His writing is very dense, filled with uncountable clauses. It makes it very difficult to put the subject with the verb, their being so widely separated. I began to wonder if my age (82) accounted for my befuddlement, but I read a great number of books and have no problem understanding their content. I confess that I skipped most of the middle of the book to where I guessed I would meet the flea, but no success yet. I would not suggest others attempt to read this book.

My wife borrowed this book from the Georgetown Library and recommended it. I liked it so well I bought a copy for my son. I had never read such a thorough and interesting account of the conditions that made the plague possible. Neither did I have any inkling how the plague cut short the "renaissance" of the Eastern Roman Empire under Justinian, removing what would have been the only power in the mideast that might have withstood the first Islamic jihad.

Well written and obviously well researched, the result is less than satisfying. The author takes too many digressions; delving into minutiae to the detriment of the story. As a result, the overall narrative suffers from dilution.

This is the first book that was interesting about the Roman world! It is plague focused but not technical so it's easy to understand. Rosen does a terrific job explaining the intricacies and interconnectivity of the Roman Empire.

To many, the bubonic plague equates to the black death of Europe and Asia in the 1300's. An equally devastating epidemic occurred in the mid-6th century during the reign of Justinian. The author provides a very readable history of the events that shaped the downfall of the various parts of the Roman Empire, the last being the Eastern Roman Empire centered in Constantinople. While many authors gloss over the plague and its impact in their histories of the period, Rosen makes a compelling, detailed case for its importance in the ultimate downfall of the Empire, as well as for the changes in society and religion that characterized the medieval period to follow, both in Europe and the Middle East. Anyone who has traveled or plans to travel in the Mediterranean regions and especially to Istanbul and the Middle East will inescapably interface with Roman history and will appreciate it more from reading this book. Those interested in the bubonic plague and how it could kill millions of people within just a few years will find the road to enlightenment through this book

very enjoyable.

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