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**William Rosen, *Justinian's Flea*
Penguin Books, 2008.**

Reviewed by Mariana Tepfenhart

Justinian's Flea by William Rosen depicts the key events that led to the first great plague of the Roman Empire and the other different forces that helped create the medieval world of Europe.

William Rosen's book is an erudite depiction of the key events that led to the first great plague of the Roman Empire. The plague, together with other different forces, created the culture that is now considered medieval Europe. These forces include geography, climate change, invasion of the nomadic people, and the impact of having Christianity adopted as the official religion by Emperor Constantine. In the introduction of the book, the author stated his intentions to provide the reader with a broad context in which the bubonic plague occurred.

The book is divided into four parts: Emperor, Glory, Bacterium and Pandemic. In the first part, the author describes the humble beginnings of Justinian, including his journey from Skopje, in Serbia Macedonia, a province where many Roman soldiers were settled, to Constantinople. The city made a profound impression on Petrus Sabbatius, the real name of Justinian. It was a cosmopolitan city with over seventy spoken languages and a population of about half a million "packed into a space roughly two-thirds the size of Manhattan." (p. 19) Although the city had numerous architectural marvels like churches and palaces, the most impressive structure was the wall surrounding it. It was Constantine, the first Christian emperor, who moved the capital from Rome to Constantinople, renewed the first wall of the city, and started to build a New Rome.

Emperor Constantine, according to the author, was not particularly interested in theological debates. However, when Arius, a priest from Alexandria, declared that Jesus was not divine and not equal to God, the emperor felt that the unity of the empire was threatened and weakened. The Council of Nicaea proclaimed that God and Jesus are of the same essence. This would have a great influence on Justinian, who also believed in a single law, a single religion in the empire.

Rosen continues with the presentation of the events that led to the fall of the western Roman Empire. The most important of these were the invasions of the Goths and the Huns. One major battle between the Goths and the Romans took place at Adrianople in 378 A.D. The Romans' defeat marked the isolation of the western side of the empire from the eastern side. It also showed the weakness of the Roman emperors who were forced to hire non-Romans in the army, who then turned around and used their new acquired military strategy to attack Rome itself. Odoacer, leader of the Ostragoth barbarians, created his own kingdom in what is now Italy during the fifth century A.D.

The new non-Roman rulers adopted, and adapted to, Roman traditions, a strategic approach that increased the stability of their rule. The new kingdoms were a mixture of Gothic, Arianism, and Italian culture, which continued to exert a powerful attraction.

The eastern empire still had the vitality that had disappeared in the west. The social elite in Constantinople followed Roman traditions and identity. They still had massive scale entertainment, such as chariot races, religious festivities, and theatres. The eastern emperors tried to prevent their subjects from adopting foreign ways, even forcing them to look Roman.

Part 2, *Glory*, takes us to the time of Justinian's reign. The author presents some of the most remarkable moments of the emperor's life. Chariot races were very popular in Constantinople, and the residents divided themselves into competitive factions called Blues and Greens. It was at one of these competitions that the Nika Revolt started as a protest first against corruption in the government, but then changed into a revolt against Justinian himself. It lasted for several days, and Justinian was ready to flee the country but was stopped by his wife, the formidable Theodora. With the help of a very capable general, the revolt was defeated in a massacre. Justinian eliminated any opposition to his government.

Hagia Sophia, the church commissioned by Justinian, stands out as one of the greatest architectural achievements in history. Justinian did not spare any expense in its construction. It was built in almost six years by two famous Greek mathematicians, Isidore of Miletus and Anthemius of Tralles. They combined mathematical and engineering skills to create a new design. Its interior walls glow from the light reflecting from the gold mosaic. Imported marble of different colors added to the sparkling effect.

To strengthen his authority and bring uniformity to his empire, Justinian codified the laws. His team of experts combined and condensed regulations intended to expedite legal cases and provide textbooks for the law students. The Civil Law of Justinian is central to the European legal system.

Justinian's most ambitious goal was to reconquer former western territories. His generals defeated the Vandals and the Ostrogoths after a series of lengthy and costly campaigns. His armies restored most of the old empire's territories. With such victories in territorial gains, he was confident that the empire would stand for centuries. However, his dreams were shattered when, in 540 A.D. a horrific epidemic swept through Constantinople killing half of the population.

Part 3, *Bacterium*, gives a detailed account of the origins of the bacteria, the type of hosts they need, how they multiply and in what conditions they mutate. *Y. Pestis*, or the "Demon," became a terrifying killer. There are different theories about the origins of the disease, but William Rosen argued that it started in Egypt. Alexandria was a very

big port to the Mediterranean Sea; it was filled with cargo ships from Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Egypt provided grain for the empire. The favorite meal of the rats, a primary bacterial host, was grain. Documents suggest that in 540 A.D. the population of rats in the Nile delta increased considerably. Also, the author describes the limited knowledge of the physicians regarding the disease, its causes and how it spread.

The last part of the book is *Pandemic*. War, trade, climate change and geographical position determined the direction taken by the plague. It started spreading north and east from Egypt. The Persians stopped encroaching on Roman territories because of the plague. The Arabs conquered the Persians in a relatively short time because the plague weakened the empire. Those provinces that traded with the Persians, like Anatolia, were hit by the disease, some of them multiple times. In Italy, hundreds of thousands were killed by war, plague or famine. Gaul, Spain and Britain were also affected. The northern lands were less troubled because the climate did not permit the cultivation of grain, which translated in a reduced population of rats to carry the disease. Other lands were protected by desert, sluggish trade or low-density population. The Roman army suffered from a shortage of recruits, requiring the emperor to hire mercenaries, which left many farms vacant and led to reduced tax revenues. The population decreased during the plague but increased after the epidemic. Labor shortages meant more land and higher salaries which in turn translated into prosperity.

The conclusion of the book is that the plague made the transition from late Mediterranean antiquity to medieval Europe possible. The Germanic states would not have survived their infancy if Justinian was able to hold onto his conquests in western Europe.

The book contains an abundance of information in different fields such as history, theology, epidemiology, architecture and evolutionary history. It is a superbly documented study describing the plague symptoms, progression, transmission and its unpredictable trajectory. I highly recommend this book for students and professors alike.