

Università della Calabria
Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici — Sezione di Storia

QUADERNI DI AIÔNOS

Saggi di storia, storiografia e culture, dall'antichità all'età contemporanea
della rivista «Aiónos. Miscellanea di studi storici»

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THE ROMANS BEFORE ADVERSITY

FORMS OF REACTION AND STRATEGIES TO MANAGE CHANGE

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PROLOGUE

According to a notorious passage from the seventh book of Orosius' *Histories against the Pagans*, a disaster of great proportions struck the city of Fidenae — today's Castel Giubileo, right in the middle of the *ager romanus*— in 27 AD, during the twelfth year of Emperor Tiberius' reign. During a gladiatorial show in the amphitheater, a large section of the stands collapsed, killing over 20,000 people (Oros. 7.12.11). This figure was most likely borrowed from Suetonius (*Tib.* 40), whereas Tacitus reports a death toll of 50,000 (Ann. 4.62). After a very brief description of the events, Orosius attempted to justify them to for his readers. In his reasoning, God destroyed the amphitheater in order to punish those who rejoiced in the death of other human beings for pleasure. This episode, moreover, almost coincided with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, making it even more reprehensible, according to the bishop's doctrinal principles (Oros. 7.12.12). In his works, Orosius compiles disasters both natural and manmade, from the original sin of Adam and Eve to his own presence as a Christian bishop in North Africa at the beginning of the 5th century. In the seven books, Orosius' narrative maintains a common thread as an overarching moral message: divine punishment of the wicked. Orosius' interpretation of history hinges on the view projected by the author's own beliefs and ideology, which was a product of his own existence. As a result, the theological explanation he offers cannot be dissociated from a simple account of the facts; indeed, he never pretended to do so.

If Orosius' interest in catastrophes directly echoes his own existence, it is no coincidence that the editors of this volume are also interested in delving into the impact of catastrophes in the Roman world precisely when we are

still in the midst of a global health crisis (2020-2021). In this volume, the reader will thus find a kaleidoscopic analysis of the phenomenon of disasters—both natural and manmade—in the Roman world, with a particular focus on the Imperial period. The chapters of this book, written both by experienced and younger researchers but with a genuinely international vocation, connect ancient evidence with the concerns of modern scholars. Several chapters address the aftermath of such ancient crises, leading both to the extinction of certain economic, social, or even political phenomena, as well as the creation of new opportunities for those who knew how, or were able to take advantage of them. As such, this book does not approach catastrophe as a mere collection of anecdotes about calamities, as many have done before. On the contrary, its main goal is to highlight the dynamics of change that are generated by such disasters, mostly unconsciously, but in fact only appreciated in the long run. In my view, both editors, J.M. Bermúdez Lorenzo and J. Pérez González, are to be congratulated for having compiled a cohesive volume by bringing out the right approach from each of their contributors, despite the diversity of topics covered. As an overall conclusion, one of the greatest contributions of this project is the integration of ‘misfortunes, changes, and opportunities’ into a single discussion forum. In all likelihood, these three items can only be understood as being interconnected, both in the Roman world and in any other historical period, the present-day included.

TONI NÁCO DEL HOYO

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INTRODUCTION

The book was born with the aim of offering a space for reflection and debate on the forms of intellectual analysis and reaction developed by Roman society in relation to catastrophic phenomena, both those of natural origination and those derived from concrete human decision-making. The main interest was focused on understanding those moments in which the daily life of Romans changed for the worse and on describing the different responses on the part of policy-makers and individuals before these critical situations, in which not everyone is able to overcome these episodes and some even take advantage of the situation opportunistically. This interpretation is reflected in the Chinese character that is translated as ‘crisis’, is pronounced as ‘wei-yi’ and consists of two characters: the character ‘wei’, which means ‘danger’, and the character ‘yi’, which means ‘crucial occasion’, ‘critical point’ and ‘opportunity’. Already the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche expressed a similar idea in the maxim “what doesn’t kill me, makes me stronger” or the corresponding maxim of Winston Churchill, “Never let a good crisis go to waste”. These reflections on the ‘critical moment’ serve as an example of the meaning of the word ‘crisis’, which derives from the Greek noun ‘krisis’ and the verb ‘krino’ which can mean, variously, ‘separate’, ‘decide’, ‘make a distinction’ and also ‘decisive moment’. Crises can thus be related to the moment of truth, a turning point in which the difference between the conditions observed before and after the given ‘moment’ becomes more noticeable than most all other moments.

This ‘incident’ marked by a critical moment within the normality of our day-to-day lives constitutes a challenge. It puts pressure on us to be able to devise new methods to manage these episodes, discarding previous

inadequate methods that prove ineffective in the face of new challenges. In this way, if a person or country manages to design new and better methods to deal with these personal or national crises, we usually say that the crisis has been successfully resolved. We sometimes even emphasize that these are the moments that force us to change, since normally, if we do well, we do not need changes.

Along these lines, the book focuses on both individuals and groups of a diverse nature in all areas of social, political, and economic life, and the perceptions resulting from overcoming these moments.

With these objectives, researchers from Italy, Portugal, Spain, Brazil, Argentina and Chile were invited to participate in the book, with a total of 16 chapters. In order to facilitate and enhance the debate on the various issues raised, the meeting was grouped into 3 thematic sections. The first two followed a time-frame extending from the 1st to the 6th centuries “Part 1: A golden age? Ways of reacting to change: perception and management strategies (1st-2nd Centuries AD) and “Part 2: An age of crisis? ways of reacting to change: perception and management strategies (3rd-6th centuries AD). The third section analyzed the reception of disasters and their individual and collective responses.

In the first section, various case-studies were addressed on a national scale, offering various perspectives related to the instability caused by a war conflict, noting responses and, in turn, highlighting the deceleration of the Empire in some regions in what they tended to observe historiographically as a golden age. – The first of the chapters, Ll. Pons Pujol from the University of Barcelona, analyzed the massacre of the population of *Volubilis* (40/41 AD) during the conquest of *Mauritania*, debating whether or not the episode really existed. During his presentation he offered the audience a rich debate concerning the contested archaeological evidence of the massacre and considering whether, on the contrary, it was a historiographic construct that survives to this day. – After this, R. De Castro, a researcher at CHAM, NOVA University of Lisbon – School of Social Sciences and Humanities (NOVA FCSH) (The Year of the Four Emperors: Perspectives on Civil War and Imperial Legitimacy in the Omens of 68 and 69 AD) collected the omens of the Roman rulers, offering a unique insight into these future visions during the chaotic period of AD 68 and 69 and its importance in manipulating public opinion and showing how political propaganda and Roman religion worked together to design, in these omens, to shape the collective memory of those turbulent years. – Thirdly in this section, the contribution of D. Romero Vera (University of Seville; *Ab*

aetate aurae ad aetatem ferream. Causes and interpretations on the beginning of the urban crisis in Hispania during the Late Antonine age) noted from an archaeological standpoint a series of changes and transformations that led to an urban crisis or loss of splendor of many Hispanic civic communities in the middle of the second century AD, examining the different historiographic approaches to this peculiar phenomenon. – Next M.A. Gómez Robledo of the University of Barcelona (La decadencia del *Municipium Augusta Bilbilis*: el ejemplo del teatro (s.I d.C.– VI d.C.)) examined the urban changes of Bilbilis and the progressive abandonment of the city, focusing his research on the use and disuse of the theater. – Conclude the section J. Moros Díaz of the University of Barcelona closed the session with a presentation dedicated to learning about the transformations of the agrarian structure of the Betic oil production area through a detailed analysis of the amphorae epigraphy from the Severian period, contextualizing and geolocating the changes in the administration of several ‘confiscated’ potteries just after Septimius Severus’s victory over Clodius Albinus (Transformations of the Baetican olive oil production area in the Severian period).

The second section starts by P. Maymó i Capdevila from the University of Barcelona focused on making known the effects of the Plague of Justinian and the strategy of meeting the crisis by the new pontiff, Gregory of Tours, who organized a new massive procession by Rome that exceeded the earthly response, requesting a divine response. – It is followed by the contribution of G. Estrada San Juan from the University of Barcelona (La peste antonina y el auge de la Nueva Profecía) focused on an anecdote (SHA Marc. 13, 4-6) about a false prophet which warned Roman citizens about the end of the world, in the context of the Antonine plague, to which was added the shortage of food, the İzmir earthquake, the overflowing of the Tiber and strange astronomical phenomena. The passage shows the speaker’s sense of hysteria during the rule of Marcus Aurelius and his subsequent pardon, perhaps in order to exemplify the emperor’s clemency. – Next, and overview is provided by A. Sáez Geoffroy from the University of La Frontera continued the proceedings with a presentation that re-evaluated the geographical context and the impact of the Antonine plague on the changes experienced in the Roman Empire at the end of the 2nd century AD. Here, the audience was able to follow the progress of the pandemic in connection with the geographical integration generated by the Roman communication networks. – The fourth chapter details analyze the persecutory edicts of Decius and Valerianus, the first persecutions generated against the Christian community and the beginning of their anti-Christian

policies to approach the causes of this situation (M. Lorente Muñoz (University of Murcia). – Close the section M. Morganti (University of Messina; Sicily in the Vandal Age: socio-economic continuity) also made use of the changes in the material culture of North African tableware spread in Sicily in the new ‘vandal kingdom’ and offered a new vision of the period, with a restructuring of production, a revitalization of ceramic workshops and a commercialization of trade.

The third section begun with an interesting presentation by A. Di Meglio from the Università degli Studi di Napoli ‘Federico II’ (*Interitus*, o l’omicidio politico. Studio sull’uso di *interitus* e sulle sue occorrenze nelle orazioni ciceroniane). Its purpose was to analyze how the use of the term *interitus* was associated with the phrase *res publica* or with historical and political figures in Rome. A particular type of death can be defined as *interitus*: the dismemberment of the Republic and its crisis; a violent death, carried out to the detriment of the tyrant (for example, G. Gracchus, Catiline, Clodius, Caesar, Antonius) or which was commissioned by the tyrant to the detriment of a politically involved and tyrannical character (such as Trebonius, L. Domitius Ahenobardus, Callisthenes, Cicero himself). The death of those who have assumed tyrannical attitudes was shown both to decree the overcoming of the crisis and the elimination of danger and to lay the foundations for the beginning of a new era and the renewal of the State. – This was followed by a review by D. Serrano Ordozgoiti (Complutense University of Madrid) of the traditionally negative image of Emperor Gallienus which was promoted in later historiography by Constantinian historians and senatorial elites of the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. In particular, the author sought to analyze the representation of the monarch created by the epitomist Aurelius Victor in his *Liber de Caesaribus* and considered how the partisan use of decenviral records and the overflowing of the Tiber River served to reinforce the position against the emperor. This offered a clear example of the objective of this third session, which focussed on the reception of disasters through the sources and the different ways of understanding or disseminating a single critical episode. – Next Á. Corona Encinas of the University of Navarra, ICS, Cátedra Álvaro d’Ors (*Apuntes sobre la fundamentación política de las reformas justinianas ante la crisis de las estructuras administrativas protobizantinas*) discussed the crisis of Roman municipal institutions and the reforms during the Justinian era, which were developed in the *Novellae* and promulgated by Emperor Justinian I. Here, the speaker delved into the transformation of the classic model of municipal administration through a detailed analysis

of the legislative sources of the period. – Another critical examination of the sources presented D. Vignola from the University of Genoa offering an interesting gender-based vision of the response of Roman women to the pressure of the Carthaginian army led by Hannibal during the Second Punic War. To learn about the heroic Roman civil response, the author analyzed the *Punica* of Silius Italicus, a text in which the resilience of the population in the face of desperate moments is specified. – The last two chapters could well be conceived as a space for personal critical episodes in the daily lives of Romans. Firstly, L. Garri Catchot from the University of Barcelona offered a theoretical reflection on the concept of rape as a weapon of war and how this sexual assault became consecrated in the case of the Vestal Virgins during Late Antiquity (with consideration of its consequences). – Finally, F. N. Silva of the Universidade Estadual de Campinas / UNICAMP (*Evergetismo e integración social: una mirada de la munificencia cívica de los libertos*) used epigraphy as the main source of study for understanding the basic civic benevolences used in overcoming servile origins and as a mechanism of social integration among freedmen in Roman public life.

Although the total number of presentations was quite heterogeneous, we believe that these stories ideally illustrate the objective of our book, which was intended to understand the changes necessary for the correct management of these critical episodes. At a general level, points of kinship could be highlighted between all the chapters. A time-scale could also be perceived which registered a series of unique decisive moments in the life of an individual, in which a dramatic and unusual event happened suddenly and without prior warning, such as the tsunamis, or a serious accident or sudden death. But in parallel, a broader time-frame could be linked to most of these crises as the culmination of a series of gradual changes linked to long intervals sustained over many years. In this way crises show themselves to be more ‘elastic’ in time, without having a notion of the original moment where, effectively, everything became worse. A connection between the microscopic and macroscopic scales can also be noted between the personal and the national crisis. How and when to resolve these crises thus became the center of many of the discussions included in the book, where the existence of different endings for the same episode became clear.

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