

The Ravaging Natural Wars: A Few Foot-Noted Disasters of the Roman World

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A Personal Prelude

Read this if you would like to know why I'm writing this piece, and why you should read it.

During spring 2020, I studied in Rome, Italy. For months I carefully planned every aspect of my semester abroad, from visas to applications to funding. Since I was young, thanks to an ambitious family and lack of fear of planes, traveling has been a part of my life. Hence, going abroad was something that intrigued me, and ultimately the idea of living in another country, in a new city, with a new culture, overcame my fears of learning a new language, making new friends and leaving my structured life in Denver. Taking the leap to Italy was difficult, but when my plane landed in Rome, I knew that no matter how scary, my little adventure was going to be life-changing; and indeed it was, in ways I never expected.

For the first month and half, my time in Rome mirrored that of any student studying abroad there: getting comfortable with the new language, navigating foreign grocery stores, getting to know some of my best friends for life, and traveling with them across Europe. Then—as nearly all 7 billion of us know now—COVID-19 arrived in northern Italy. At the time, none of us, including my teachers, friends and many Italian locals, knew just what we were dealing with. In our minds, our experience with Ebola, HIV, and AIDS, while certainly epidemics, prompted us to treat COVID-19 with just the same nonchalance—as something “happening over there.” Thus, it was after many internal crises, emotional debates on phone calls, panic attacks in my dorm’s elevator, and decree’s from the Italian and US governments, that I went home—one of the most challenging decisions of my entire 21-year life.



A photo of me standing in front of the Pantheon, a monument that could tell a story or two if it could talk, *Rome, Italy*

I'll be the first to say that in a selfish way, I was absolutely devastated by the end of my study abroad. Although I am extremely aware of how little my displacement was compared to others—such as those who lost loved ones, friends, or even their own lives—in this pandemic, I still feel the need to validate my loss. In a therapeutic kind of way, writing this down reminds me that, indeed, I lost a

piece of something that I worked very hard for, spent many hours preparing for, and was thoroughly enjoying! It's difficult not to be cynical about COVID-19 when it affects so much of our daily lives; but that got me to thinking. Certainly, in a time before our comfortable 21st-century lives, people must have experienced similar pain, personal loss, and disruption by something so uncontrollable.

While in Rome, I took an on-site ancient Roman history course on the monuments of Rome. I immediately fell into the whims of the rich and exciting narratives of the Roman Empire, the history of which I still yearn to explore, even after the conclusion of the vibrant class. What caught my attention, if even slightly, were the footnoted disasters of the Roman world which, in the context of ancient history, were only blips on the timeline, yet clearly horrible for the people who lived through them. Thus, I decided that in order to gain a bit of empirical perspective on our current pandemic, I might slip back into Ancient Rome to discover what humans have overcome in the past, simultaneously learning how we might get through our own *challenging times*.

Natural War #1: Fire

Fire, the hot and destructive combustion of hydrocarbons with oxygen, might be both mankind's most valuable and dangerous reaction. When controlled, this reaction is capable of generating many terawatts of power, heating millions of homes and transporting humans thousands of miles. But, when out of control, combustion can cause mass destruction to the environment, our infrastructure, and even human life.

Since the birth of civilization, fires have fought to reduce decade- or even century-old urban metropolises to the rubble and ashes of their entropic destinies in just a few days. Many of the largest and oldest cities are those that were able to adapt to the fiery inevitability, each with "Great fire" events prefixing their name (The Great Fire of... London, Chicago, New York, etc). Ancient Rome was no different: in its 1000 year history, an approximate 88 fires were documented by various scholars and historians as they happened (Desmond 137). In ancient Rome, once-in-a-generation fires were common, and were responsible for scenes as seen in the painting above by Hubert Robert. The particularly winding streets and unsymmetric domains of the ancient city, still seen in the layout of modern Rome, made it difficult to navigate and escape. This fact led Margaret Desmond, in her thesis on fires in Rome, to conclude that "Rome, a city teeming with naked flame, was an accident waiting to happen" (Desmond 152). And indeed it was, many times over.



Fire in Rome by Hubert Robert

Seeing how many fires dot the history of Rome, we'll focus on one fire in particular in order to take a magnifying glass on the intricacies of such a disaster. On July 19th, 64 CE, during the reign of Nero, a fire began in some shops around the Circus Maximus, a chariot racing stadium. With the heat of the summer accompanied by strong

winds, the fire gave no mercy, spreading quickly throughout the city. It is said that approximately 70% of the city, or 10 out of 14 districts, were destroyed in the blazing fire, killing hundreds of Roman citizens and forcing thousands into homelessness. Many famous temples were also decimated in the blaze (Stock 47).

But just as with any history class or textbook, recounting the statistics of such disasters cannot wholly capture the impacts. So, in order to project what these ancient Romans experienced on to our lives, imagine the city of your current residence in its pristine state. Then, imagine that in only a matter of days, 70% of the city is grounded, leaving only remnants of what you once knew. Sound like the post-apocalypse? This is what Rome faced in the summer of 64 CE, with panic gripping the city because of a relentless fiery storm convinced on destroying everything it touched.

But, it was Rome's response to these fires that give us the widest perspective on how disasters affect mankind. In the face of adversity, Rome was forced to adapt to a seemingly un-controllable natural force. They wrote legislation to enforce public safety, added preventive building regulations, advanced their technology of building materials, and created the *Vigiles* (watchmen of the city) to prevent fires— essentially Rome's firefighters (Desmond). These measures, which are so ingrained in our culture and government today that we usually take them for granted, were invented out of necessity two thousand years ago; and I can't help but take a moment to pause and thank those who suffered the losses of those great fires in Ancient Rome so that we could learn how to prevent similar atrocities.

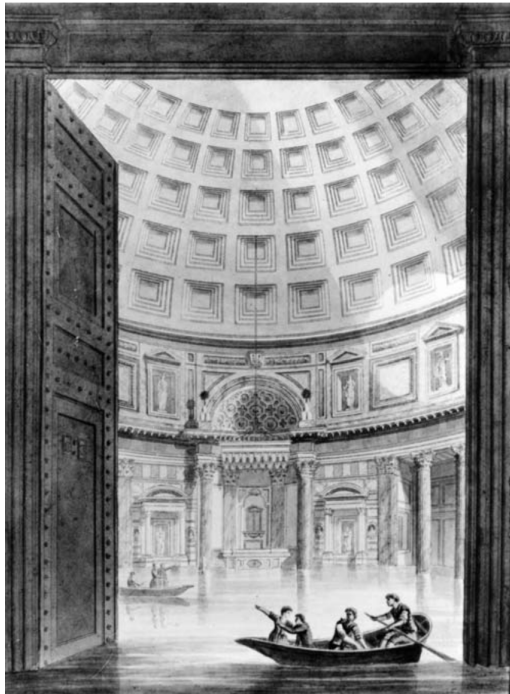
But, Romans also dealt with fires in a way that is credited to both their lack of physical chemistry and culture built on religion. Again from her thesis on fires in Rome, Desmond explains: "The efforts expended to prevent fire were great ... but an ambiguity lies at the heart of the relationship between those efforts and the view of fires as divine acts which could not be prevented" (Desmond 158). Even though the Romans could not understand what fire was or exactly how it functioned, they ascribed fire to the only cause of any sense to them: their gods. So, although they might have prayed for fires to not destroy their city, they understood that destruction was a part of their existence, and this might have helped them cope with the ravaging natural war of their city aflame.

Natural War #2: Floods

Floods, a byproduct of Earth's pulsing water cycle, are all too familiar to the majority of humans. In the context of human history, they bear respective positive and negative connotations: while they bring all-important water to civilizations dependent on crops, they are also responsible for destroying the metropolises and urban environments which arise from such civilizations. Flood's ammunition is simple— the abundant H₂O, yet they contend with fire in their destructive capabilities. Simply put, floods are necessary to Earth's life-inducing ecosystem, but hold back none of their corresponding intensity for humanity, drowning cities without a second-thought.

Ancient Rome, built along the even more ancient Tiber River, faced 33 documented major floods during its existence. The Tiber, flowing from the inner Italian mountains to the Mediterranean Sea, played a significant role in allowing Ancient Rome to grow into the expansive city that it was. It was a highway for food, goods, and the military as the Roman empire expanded radially outward from Rome. But the 50-year

and 100-year flood plains gave no mercy to the ill-fated city. I'll let a few of the primary sources of these floods, the famous Cassius Dio and Plutarch, describe Rome during these massive floods:



Drawing of people in boats inside the Pantheon, Flood of 1686, J. H. W. Tischbein

“For of a sudden, such a storm descended upon the whole city and all the country that quantities of trees were torn up by the roots, many houses were shattered, the boats moored in the Tiber both near the city and at its mouth were sunk, and the wooden bridge [the Pons Sublicius] destroyed, and a theater built of timbers for some festival collapsed and, in the midst of all this, great numbers of human beings perished.” (Dio 37.58.2–4)

“The behavior of the Tiber, too, was regarded by most people as a baleful sign. It was a time, to be sure, when rivers are at their fullest, but the Tiber had never before risen so high, nor caused such great ruin and destruction. It overflowed its banks and submerged a great part of the city and especially the grain market, so that dire scarcity of food prevailed for many days together. (Plutarch *Otho* 4.5) (69 CE)

These historians didn't sugar-coat the realities of Rome's watery demise. The Tiber swallowed Rome, ripping apart the infrastructure, submerging food, and taking many human lives. If the initial effects of the currents weren't enough, the standing water would soak through structures, leaving them unsafe. Scenes as depicted in the drawing to the right were common for many days

after a flood—a Venice identity crisis.

Even though Rome's economy was only a fraction of the global economy we know today, floods were equally as jarring as COVID. Gregory Aldrete explains in his book, *Floods of the Tiber in Ancient Rome*: “Much of the economic functioning of the city would have ground to a halt as businesses closed and workers failed to show up at their jobs. Instead of attending to their usual occupations, people would have wholly devoted their energy to such tasks as finding shelter, rescuing possessions, and locating family and friends” (Alldrete 92). While humanity still deals with flooding, just the same as the Romans, it's clear that the lack of rescue helicopters, and many of the other modern day technologies, made floods much worse for Ancient Rome.

But just as with fires, the Romans were forced to innovate, attempting to control the un-controllable. Over hundreds of years of studying the Tiber and building on ancient technologies, the river was managed with embankment walls and drainage systems. Still today, the flood-prevention measures can be seen by simply viewing the river from any bridge in Rome— you'll notice that the city seems lifted above the river out of harm's way, the layers of Rome exposed in cross-sectioned progress.

Though these ancient floods couldn't have been very fun, the Romans held an interesting relationship with them, similar to fires. Once again faced with the horrors of nature unleashed, the Romans turned to their gods. Aldrete explains: “For the Romans... the Tiber was not simply a body of flowing water, but also a potentially dangerous

divinity who demanded respect. When such an entity erupted from its normal confines, bringing wide-scale destruction, it would have been tempting to see such an event not as a random occurrence but instead as a deliberate statement from the gods” (Aldrete 219). To us, floods may just be understood meteorological probabilities— forces of nature that can be managed with enough preparation— but to the Romans, floods were divine. The ravaging natural wars of their city underwater were signs from the gods, and the Roman’s listened carefully.

Natural War #3: Disease

And finally we come to the most relevant war to us all: the one that has evaded our cozy 21st century lives and caused quite the disruption; the one that, despite its microscopic landscape, has affected our human-scape in deadly ways. It’s clear that this isn’t the first time mankind has dealt with such viral warfare. Any basic history class tells of disease riddled throughout time, and the era of the Roman Empire was no exception.

During what was a prosperous time for the Roman World (165 CE to 180 CE), a deadly plague slithered though the empire to all corners of the Mediterranean. The pandemic was dubbed the Antonine plague, after the family name of Marcus Aurelius Antonius, the emperor of Rome at the time of the outbreak (and an eventual casualty of the disease). The plague, which has been argued to most likely have been smallpox, was quite the breach of any normality in Rome, just as COVID is in the modern world. While the perspectives on the plague are limited to a few historians, they narrate a time of a death and fear:

“Moreover, a pestilence occurred, the greatest of any of which I have knowledge; for two thousand persons often died in Rome in a single day. Then, too, many others, not alone in the City, but throughout almost the entire empire, perished at the hands of criminals who smeared some deadly drugs on tiny needles and for pay infected people with the poison by means of these instruments” (Dio 73.14)

Cassius Dio marks this time with striking figures, that of which only grew during the second outbreak, in which an estimated 5,000 souls perished in Rome every day (Horgan). To paint a better picture of these horrifying statistics, these

Romans were not dying in hospitals or on pain medication. They were suffering the plague until the bitter end with some ordinary symptoms of illness: “fever, diarrhea, vomiting, thirstiness, swollen throat, and coughing” and some symptoms of more disgusting nature: “skin eruptions or rash, over the entirety of the body distinguished by



The angel of death striking a door during the plague of Rome, Jules-Elie Delaunay; Aesculapius; Levasseur [CC-BY-4.0](#)

red and black papules or eruptions”, as attested by Galen, a Greek physician who was present in Rome during the plague (Horgan).

But beyond the direct effects on human life, the Antonine Plague is probably most famous for initiating the downfall of the Roman Empire, spurred by changes to the economy and religion. The world can surely sympathize with the Romans in a turbulent pandemic economy. But, the Romans faced economy shutdowns not because of pandemic prevention, but because of pandemic aftermath. The high mortality rate throughout the empire meant fewer people were stimulating the ancient economy, which meant fewer crops and goods were being traded (Horgan). “Historians believe that the decrease in population and the lower quality of food availability eventually enabled the attack of Rome by barbarians, costing the empire the entire western region, leading to the Byzantine era” (Hanna 6).

And similarly to fire and floods, the Roman gods were quickly acknowledged as the bringers of the plague. But, it was Marcus Aurelius’ persistence that it was the Christians’ unwillingness to respect the Roman gods which led the populous to turn away and sink deeper into Christianity, a religion which offered promises of an always-loving God and a Heaven during a time of such great death (Horgan).

The Romans suffered greatly from many plagues, just one being the Antonine Plague. While our understanding of exactly what it was like to live through a pandemic in Ancient Rome may be incomplete, it is clear the our 2,000-year old friends were faced with much adversity—and if history tells us anything, that is that change in the face of *challenging times* is inevitable. Read on for a little cherry on top of this ancient perspective. Spoiler-alert: COVID-19 is not just a force for suffering.

Conclusion (and a personal epilogue)

When I first set out to write this piece, I was determined to prove to you (and also myself) that COVID-19 really isn’t that bad— that people have suffered much worse. I turned to the Romans, who built an empire equally as impressive to any modern super-power, given their ancient technology. As I read the Roman’s history, from wars to emperors to monuments to gods, I was struck by the disasters which all individually could have knocked the grand civilization to ruins. Yet, these disasters seemed so small in comparison to Rome’s lasting imprint on humanity. It is not until now that I realize why this is so.

After researching all of the ravaging natural wars on the Roman empire, what stands out is what came in the wake of such *challenging times*. Fires helped Romans understand their urban risks and the protections needed thereof. Floods gave Romans the motivation to re-design and innovate their capital city. And disease, while ultimately being suspect in the downfall of the empire, may actually change the verb from “downfall” to “shift”, as the plague gave way for Christianity and the Byzantium Empire. What do all of these things have in common?

Change. The ancient peoples suffered greatly, but what came of their suffering was a progression in humanity: an expanding understanding of the world in which we inhabit and our continuing relationship with the natural world. Romans surely experienced fire, flood, and disease. We are surely experiencing fire, flood, and disease (all of which have been proven to be modern issues). And surely, humanity will

experience all of these again. But, just as the Romans left us with the lessons of their suffering, might we *actively* leave the next generation with the lessons of ours?

Today's world is chaotic; this is no secret. At times it may feel impossible to tame the chaos or find meaning in the natural wars threatening our livelihoods. I have certainly felt out of control for most of the past year. But, overcoming these wars is not impossible—it's our responsibility. For every natural disaster faced by the Romans, they felt as we do now: defeated, lost, and scared. And it's okay to feel defeated, lost, and scared... for a little bit. Now it's time to do as our ancient friends did: pick ourselves up, innovate, and push for a future we can be proud of, no matter how long it takes. But, considering we have hand sanitizer and the marvels of modern medicine, I'm sure that future is near, compared to the Romans whose suffering lasted for decades.

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