

## Book Reviews

Colin Elliott, *Pox Romana. The Plague that Shook the Roman World* (Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2024). xxiv+304pp. ISBN 9780691219158. £28 (h/b).

At the height of Rome's power in the middle of the second century CE a new disease (the Antonine plague, name after the dynastic name of the family of Emperors who ruled at this time) struck its legions and devastated its cities. This pandemic, perhaps the world's first, marked a turning point in Rome's history as the so-called *Pax Romana*, the roughly 200-year period of imperial expansion, prosperity, stability and relative peace, gave way to a complex set of problems that eventually led to the Empire's decline and fall. Colin Elliott's book, *Pox Romana*, provides an engaging and lucid account of the disease's origins, its impact on the Roman Empire and the changes that were witnessed throughout the Empire after the disease had receded.

While severe epidemics were a feature of all pre-modern societies, the Antonine Plague that swept through the Roman Empire during the 160s can be traced to its origins amongst troops campaigning in the Near East. As they returned home, they dispersed the disease throughout the Empire. As Elliot acknowledges, very little direct evidence exists about this plague but, by using census records, real estate contracts, climate data, coinage and amphorae finds alongside ancient inscriptions and histories he is able to assess the demographic impact of the disease. It is not possible to determine with certainty which pathogen was responsible for this plague. The Roman medic Galen, who witnessed it first hand, noted that it spread quickly in groups who lived in close contact with each other. He also described that most of its victims experienced fever, some suffered diarrhoea, some coughed up blood and the scabs of ulcers with the most distinct symptom being a dry, black pustular rash occurring between nine and twelve days after infection. From Galen's description many have suggested that the disease was a form of ancient smallpox; however, without genetic confirmation—which may be possible in the not too distant future—it is not possible to be sure of this. It is likely that this mystery disease was viral, but even this remains a speculative conclusion.

Even though mortality rates cannot be calculated, evidence is available about the impact of the disease, with individual legions being hit hard and cities, including Rome, suffering significant outbreaks. This resulted in problems of recruitment to the army and also had unexpected consequences such as an increase in the costs of

## Book Reviews

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gladiators as many were forced to join the army. The plague lasted a relatively short time, perhaps because the surviving population built up some form of immunity, although Rome appears to have suffered another substantial outbreak in 190 CE. Following the murder of emperor Commodus in 192, the Empire was plunged into civil war and decline set in. The timing of these events has led many to believe that the plague was responsible for a significant turning point in Rome's history. However, Elliot views the plague as a 'catalyst of catastrophe' rather than 'a catastrophe in its own right' and instead recounts how many of the factors responsible for this change, such as a stagnant economy, a lack of military success, administrative inefficiency and food insecurity, were already present in the Empire well before the plague struck. Therefore, 'against the fragile Pax Romana, the Antonine plague pressed suddenly and unexpectedly, jolting Roman society into a new era that had been silently prepared in prior decades' (p. 216).

We must be grateful to Colin Elliott for providing us with such a thorough and detailed account of the Antonine plague. The book is well written and can be easily understood by the non-specialist. It is a welcome addition to the literature.

Chris Galley

S. Watts and R. Collingwood, *Shropshire Hearth Tax Exemptions 1662-1674* (n.p., Sylvia Watts and Ralph Collingwood, 2018). vi+423 pp. ISBN 978-0-954826253. £10 (p/b).

The lists of households and individuals in Shropshire that were exempt from paying the Hearth Tax have been collated and transcribed in this valuable contribution. The majority of the book is taken up with a transcription of the exemption certificates for 1662, 1663, 1664, 1670, 1671, 1672 and 1673. These are ordered by year, parish and date. The authors then provide a set of summary tables. The first of these gives the aggregate number of exemptions per parish and year, together with the percentage of households in each parish that were exempt in each year. The second and third give the distribution of houses within each parish and township in 1672 according to the number of hearths. Finally, an alphabetical list is provided of the persons granted exemption certificates, with their parish and the year(s) of their exemption stated. The introductory section of the book consists of a description of the exemption certificates and how they might be used to estimate population totals, together with a discussion of the main features of the Hearth Tax in Shropshire compared with some other counties. Shropshire seems to have had a higher percentage of households with a single hearth than counties such as Kent and Cambridgeshire, which seems of a piece with its less prosperous economy.

## Book Reviews

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One- or two-hearth households were more common in rural areas than in the towns, but even among the towns there was great variation from, at one extreme, Ludlow (43 per cent of households with one or two hearths) to, at the other extreme, Ellesmere (87 per cent). The authors also estimate the percentages of households in each parish that were exempt and try to understand the reasons for variations in these percentages. Apart from the obvious factor of geographical variations in the rural economy, they observe that differences in the preparedness of justices of the peace to grant exemptions, and of parish officers to nominate households who might potentially be exempt, could contribute to parish-level variations in the prevalence of exemptions. Because it includes individuals' names, this volume may be of use to family historians as well as social, demographic and economic historians. It can contribute to both individual-level and aggregate-level analyses of social and economic patterns and change in the past. It will be especially useful as Shropshire is not (so far as this reviewer is aware) one of the counties for which the Hearth Tax exemption certificates have been catalogued by The National Archives.

Andrew Hinde