

## Book Review

### Pox Romana. The Plague That Shook the Roman World

Elliott (C.) Pp. xxiv + 304, ills, maps. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024. Cased, £28, US\$32. ISBN: 978-0-691-21915-8

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Colin Elliott's *Pox Romana: The Plague that Shook the Roman World* is a comprehensive examination of one of the Roman Empire's most devastating crises, the Antonine Plague of the 2nd century CE. Elliott delves into the plague's origins, spread, impact on the Roman world, and its wider implications for Roman society, economy, and political stability. For students, particularly those studying ancient history, public health in historical contexts, or the history of pandemics, *Pox Romana* provides a thorough and scholarly exploration of a

pivotal event that shaped the Roman Empire and, arguably, the course of history.

Elliott structures the book around key areas affected by the Antonine Plague, covering the epidemic's medical and epidemiological aspects, its effect on the Roman military and economy, and its social and religious consequences. He draws from a wide range of sources, including ancient historical accounts, recent archaeological findings, and epidemiological analysis, to offer a multidimensional view of the plague's impact. This structure is beneficial for students, as it not only provides a clear breakdown of the material but also makes the complex subject matter easier to navigate.

One of the book's strongest points for a student audience is Elliott's ability to contextualise the plague within the larger framework of Roman history. He begins by introducing the Roman Empire at its height, providing a brief yet informative overview of the political, economic, and social structure of the 2nd century CE. For students who may be unfamiliar with the period, this introduction is invaluable, offering a solid foundation that makes

the subsequent discussion of the plague's impact much more comprehensible. Elliott also discusses the role of trade networks and military movements in the spread of the plague, connecting the disease's transmission to the empire's expansion and integration. This contextual grounding helps students understand why the Antonine Plague was so devastating, and why it was able to spread as widely as it did.

Elliott's exploration of the plague's epidemiology is another highlight of the book, and one that may be particularly engaging for students interested in medical history. He delves into the possible origins of the plague, exploring theories that range from smallpox to measles, and he discusses the challenges of diagnosing ancient diseases based on historical descriptions. This section combines historical analysis with modern medical insights, demonstrating how interdisciplinary approaches can enhance our understanding of ancient events. While the medical terminology can be challenging at times, Elliott makes an effort to define key terms and concepts, making the content accessible even for students who may not have a background in biology or medicine. His discussion of epidemiology is particularly relevant in today's context, as students can draw parallels between ancient pandemics and modern ones, enhancing their understanding of both.

The book's analysis of the plague's social impact is also well-suited for students, as it touches on a variety of topics that are often covered in history and sociology courses. Elliott explores how the Antonine Plague affected different social classes within the Roman Empire, examining the disproportionate burden borne by the lower classes and the urban poor. He also discusses the psychological impact of the plague, including widespread fear, superstition, and shifts in religious practices. For instance, he explains how the plague led to an increase in devotion to certain gods and goddesses, as people sought divine protection and intervention. This focus on social responses to the plague provides a window into Roman cultural and religious practices, making it a valuable resource for students interested in ancient social history and the sociology of health.

A notable strength of *Pox Romana* is Elliott's use of primary sources, particularly the writings of ancient historians like Galen and Cassius Dio, who provided first-hand accounts of the Antonine Plague's effects on Roman society. By analysing these sources, Elliott allows students to engage directly with historical evidence, encouraging them to think critically about the reliability and limitations of ancient accounts. His careful interpretation of these sources is an excellent model for students learning how to work with primary historical texts, as he highlights the challenges of reading ancient narratives with a modern lens while extracting valuable information. This approach not only makes the book more engaging but also adds an educational dimension, teaching students how to approach historical analysis.

Elliott's attention to the economic consequences of the plague is another area that will appeal to students, especially those interested in the economic history of the ancient world. He details how the Antonine Plague disrupted trade, decreased agricultural production,

and led to labour shortages that forced changes in the Roman economy. Elliott links these economic shifts to broader trends in Roman history, suggesting that the plague may have contributed to the beginning of the empire's decline. While Elliott does not argue that the plague was the sole cause of Rome's later challenges, he effectively highlights its role as a catalyst for economic and social changes that had long-term consequences. This analysis encourages students to think about the interconnectedness of historical events and the complex factors that contribute to the rise and fall of empires.

Despite its many strengths, *Pox Romana* does have some limitations for a student readership. Elliott's writing style, while clear and precise, can be dense at times, especially when he delves into technical details about medical history and economics. Some sections may require multiple readings for students who are not already familiar with these topics, particularly when Elliott discusses statistical data or complex epidemiological theories. However, the book's organisation into clearly defined chapters and sections makes it easier for students to navigate and focus on the areas most relevant to their studies.

One area where the book could improve is in its use of visual aids. Given the complexity of the subject matter, maps illustrating the spread of the plague, timelines of key events, and charts summarising economic impacts would have been helpful additions. Such visual elements could aid student readers in grasping the scope of the plague and its effects on different regions within the Roman Empire. However, this absence does not significantly detract from the book's overall value, as Elliott's detailed descriptions are generally sufficient for students with strong reading comprehension skills.

In terms of academic resources, *Pox Romana* includes an extensive bibliography and footnotes, making it an excellent starting point for students interested in further research. Elliott cites a wide range of sources, from ancient texts to modern studies on epidemiology and economic history, offering students a well-rounded foundation for exploring the topic in greater depth. The bibliography is particularly useful for undergraduate and graduate students, as it points them toward both primary sources and contemporary scholarship, allowing them to engage with the material on a more advanced level.

In conclusion, *Pox Romana: The Plague that Shook the Roman World* by Colin Elliott is a well-researched and insightful study of the Antonine Plague and its profound impact on the Roman Empire. For students, it provides a detailed and accessible analysis of a critical historical event, with chapters that cover a range of interdisciplinary topics, from medical history to economics and sociology. While the book's density and lack of visual aids may pose minor challenges, its strengths far outweigh these drawbacks. Elliott's ability to contextualise the plague within Roman history, his use of primary sources, and his comprehensive approach make *Pox Romana* an invaluable resource for students seeking to understand the complexities of pandemics in history and the resilience of societies in the face of crisis.

Overall, *Pox Romana* is highly recommended for student readers in classical studies, history, and public health, offering both a thorough academic exploration and a meaningful reflection on how pandemics shape civilisations.

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