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Justinian's Flea: Plague, Empire, and the Birth of Europe, by
William Rosen, Viking, 2007

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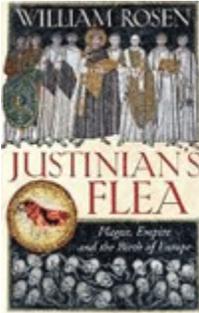
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Justinian's Flea: Plague, Empire, and the Birth of Europe

by William Rosen, Viking, 2007

Reviewed by George Geib

Few experiences have evoked greater fear in history than plague. For nearly two millennia, the Black Death kept returning to Europe to ravage cities and civilizations. One of the earlier, and more terrible, outbreaks came during the reign of the last important ancient Roman emperor, Justinian. Rosen merges the stories of pandemic and imperial decline into an engaging narrative targeted to the general reader. Most accounts of that age mirror Procopius and his sixth century contemporaries, interested in Justinian as law giver, builder of Hagia Sophia, reconqueror of the western Roman empire, and source of great personal anecdotes. Rosen deftly retells these tales, but adds the larger context of the terrible pressures upon the ancient eastern empire that saw its rapid fragmentation into a recognizably medieval world. Chief among these pressures is the bubonic plague outbreak that struck Constantinople in 542 and eventually killed an estimated 25 million people. Big picture history is at least as old as Edward Gibbon, and as current as Jared Diamond. If you like such introductions to people and ideas, Rosen should entertain and inform you.

- George Geib is Professor of History at Butler University.