

Abstract Global History Seminar, Osaka University

Johannes Preiser-Kapeller, Austrian Academy of Sciences (Johannes.Preiser-Kapeller@oeaw.ac.at)

Empire, Collapse and Ecology. A comparative view across Afro-Eurasia during “Long Late Antiquity” (4th-11th century CE)

Since Jared Diamond’s 2005 bestseller “Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed“, despite severe scholarly criticism, some of his scenarios on ancient civilisations such as Viking Age Greenland, the Easter Island or the Maya have become popular “iconic” examples of societal breakdown due to changing environmental conditions, lack of adaptiveness and depletion of resources. Especially the later aspect has even before been emphasised when determining the causes of the collapse of ancient empires of the Mediterranean; J. Donald Hughes in his 1975 monograph “Ecology in Ancient Civilizations” stated: “an environmentalist movement did not exist in Rome” and reasoned: “The Romans’ failure to adapt their society and economy to the natural environment in harmonious ways is one of the causes of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, if not in fact the basic and underlying one.” The recently rising interest in climate change has fostered the generation of similar scenarios, such as Ronnie Ellenblum’s “The Collapse of the Eastern Mediterranean. Climate Change and the Decline of the East, 950–1072” (in 2012) or Kyle Harper’s “Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire” (2017).

In this presentation, we critically evaluate these scenarios and contrast them with a comparison of case studies from various empires across Afro-Eurasia from the 4th up to the 11th century CE (so within a “Long Late Antiquity” as recently proposed by Garth Fowden, 2015, or Thomas Bauer, 2018). For this purpose, we adapt concepts from environmental history such as “imperial ecology” and “urban metabolism” as well as network and complexity theory and combine them with data from historical, archaeological and natural scientific research. In particular, we re-evaluate the actual shares of environmental factors in times of calamities in order to re-interpret “natural events” as social processes and to explore strategies of resilience and adaptation of these imperial formations and their urban centres, thus contributing to a more nuanced picture of the entanglement between empire and ecology in a global perspective.