

A History of Disease in Ancient Times

Philip Norrie

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More Lethal than War

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This book is dedicated to the people, forgotten by history, who died from the epidemics that helped end the Bronze Age in the Near East.

FOREWORD

Dr. Norrie's excellent work—*A History of Disease in Ancient Times*—is one of the most important and novel contributions to the history and theory of epidemiology in decades. The book emphasizes a crucial concept that historians seem to have missed. This is that infectious epidemic diseases would have been a crucial explanatory variable for the cyclic changes of the Bronze Age, including the collapse of the major civilization of that era.

Dr. Norrie's work captures evidence for epidemic impacts from a variety of sources—historic, archeologic, linguistic, medical, social, anthropological and economic—and makes a convincing argument for including epidemiology in discussions of Bronze Age changes. Such changes have been poorly understood and controversial before this contribution. What Norrie has done that is especially significant is to introduce the epidemiologic notion of the “web of causation” to patterns of change in the civilizations of that era. When epidemiology is added to the mix of explanatory theories, the picture of Bronze Age change and collapse becomes more focused and reasonable. This is a major intellectual accomplishment. Dr. Norrie provides multiple examples of this interaction, some well-known and some less well-known, up to the struggles of ancient Rome with its arch-enemy Carthage.

As Dr. Norrie notes, “Disease has killed more people, over the ages, than all the wars, famines and other disasters put together.” This is a well-known axiom in modern public health and epidemiology, and is a concept commonly taught in modern public health curricula in epidemiology, relying on historic examples and data, which clearly illustrate this point and

are legion. What Norrie then asks is a deceptively simple and immensely powerful question—Why should this have been different in Antiquity?

The answer is that it would not have been different. It would behoove historians and other aficionados of “the Antique” to consider their theories of evolution, change and decline within the possibilities of a web that metaphorically captures system change, and allows biological events at the population level to have meaning.

The great Charles Rosenberg, in his classic *The Cholera Years*, notes one of the central axioms of epidemiology: “A disease is no absolute physical entity but a complex physical construct, an amalgam of biological state and social definition.” In recent years the public health model has come to a great appreciation of this concept. Philip Norrie deftly incorporates this concept throughout his book. It is a concept that, beyond modern utilization in the age of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, also would have had meaning in the Bronze Age epidemics, where severity and degrees of infection would have been variable and susceptible to interpretation.

This book will provide excellent service to those who practice medicine, anthropology, epidemiology and ancient history. It provides a wonderful summation of historical material, an interesting and highly plausible new theory, and would be an excellent (and needed) supplemental reading for other new works, such as Eric Cline’s “1177 B.C.—The Year Civilization Collapsed”. I very much appreciate Dr. Norrie’s efforts to re-think the Bronze Age with an open and creative mind.

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Dr. Philip Norrie, Sydney

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