Landscape, climate and the survival of an empire: Byzantine Anatolia c 500-1000 CE

Seminar presented by John Haldon, Professor of History at Princeton University.

No-one doubts that climate, environment and societal development are linked in causally complex ways. But in relating these different evidential spheres in an explanatorily satisfactory way, we must consider a number of issues, not least the scale at which the climatic and environmental events are observed, and how this relates to the societal changes in question. Differentiating between the various effects of the structural dynamics of a set of inter-connected or overlapping socio-economic or cultural systems is complex; building into our explanation the impact of environmental stressors does not make life easier. One good reason for a historical perspective is to determine how different categories of socio-political system respond to different levels of stress – in the hope that such knowledge can contribute to contemporary policy and future planning, for example. How and why are some societal systems more resilient or flexible than others? If we don’t really understand these complex causal associations, we are unlikely to generate effective responses.

Since Anatolia was for several centuries the heart of the medieval eastern Roman empire, understanding how its climate impacted on the political, social and cultural history of the eastern Roman world would seems to be an important consideration. But only recently have historians begun to think about this seriously and to take into account the integration of high-resolution archaeological, textual and environmental data with longer-term low-resolution palaeo-environmental data, which can afford greater precision in identifying some of the causal relationships underlying societal change. In fact, the Anatolian case challenges a number of assumptions about the impact of climatic factors on socio-political organization and medium-term historical evolution. In particular, the study raises the question of how the environmental conditions of the later seventh and eighth centuries CE impacted upon the ways in which the eastern Roman Empire was able to weather the storm of the initial Arab-Islamic raids and invasions of the period ca. 650-740 and how it was able to expand again in the tenth century. When looked at holistically, the palaeoenvironmental, archaeological and historical data reflect a complex interaction of anthropogenic and natural factors that throw significant light on the history of the empire and its neighbors, offering at the same time a useful approach to similar issues in other cultures and periods.
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