



Floods, Famines, And Emperors: El Nino And The Fate Of Civilizations

Brian Fagan

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In 1997 and early 1998, one of the most powerful El Niños ever recorded disrupted weather patterns all over the world. Europe suffered through a record freeze as the American West was hit with massive floods and snowstorms; in the western Pacific, meanwhile, some island nations literally went bone dry and had to have water flown in on transport planes. Such effects are not new: climatologists now know the El Niño and other climate anomalies have been disrupting weather patterns throughout history. But until recently, no one had asked how this new understanding of the global weather system related to archaeology and history.

Droughts, floods, heat and cold put stress on cultures and force them to adapt. What determines whether they adapt successfully? How do these climate stresses affect a people's faith in the foundations of their society and the legitimacy of their rulers? How vulnerable is our own society to climate change? In this dazzlingly original new book, archaeologist Brian Fagan shows that short-term climate shifts have been a major—and hitherto unrecognized—force in history. El Niño-driven droughts have brought on the collapse of dynasties in Egypt; El Niño monsoon failures have caused historic famines in India; and El Niño floods have destroyed whole civilizations in Peru. Other short-term climate changes may have caused the mysterious abandonment of the Anasazi dwellings in the American Southwest and the collapse of the ancient Maya empire, as well as changed the course of European history. This beautifully written, groundbreaking book opens a new door on our understanding of historical events.

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