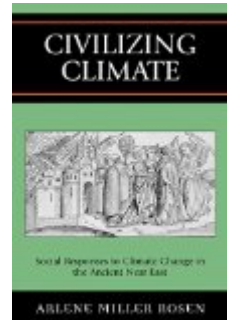


**Arlene Miller Rosen.** *Civilizing Climate: Social Responses to Climate Change in the Ancient Near East.* Plymouth: Altamira Press, 2007. 209 pp. \$32.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7591-0494-5.



**Reviewed by** Dan Tamir

**Published on** H-Environment (December, 2007)

The word combination "climate change" has become a buzzword lately, loudly resonating not only in scientific literature, but in the daily press as well. Like many public discussions, the debate about climate change frequently uses a scientific cloak to veil pure political and commercial interests, or at least to distract the public awareness away from them. Among all that babble, Arlene Miller Rosen's *Civilizing Climate* provides a coherent set of examples for the ways past societies have dealt with climatic changes, with the hope that even today's stakeholders might learn something from it.

Rosen has divided this book into chapters and subchapters, both chronologically and thematically. Chronologically, the book is divided into chapters reviewing late Pleistocene hunter-gatherers, early complex societies of the Holocene era, and the empires in the Roman-Byzantine period. Thematically, data gathered by various research methods--palinology, geomorphology, isotope analysis, archeology, and written history--are eloquently presented in the various chapters. This wide yet well organized data presentation enables

a reader who is interested in one period or a specific kind of evidence to locate that subject easily and simply.

Rosen succeeds in making this very detailed research accessible for those who are not experts in the exact fields of research she reviews. She explains, for example, the basic principles of various measurement methods in a way that even a lay reader specializing in contemporary history can understand. This technical aspect can be useful for students of places other than the eastern coasts of the Mediterranean surveyed in this book. The author also uses comparisons with other sites around the globe to strengthen her arguments. All together, however, the book does not make an "easy" reading, as data details are usually brought forward within the text, a presentation method that in some cases disturbs the fluency of reading.

Based on a wide and comprehensive collection of studies conducted during the last century, Rosen brings reconstructions both of climatic changes and the social and economic developments in the Levant (the western part of the Fer-

tile Crescent, today's Israel, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon) from the late Pleistocene to the Byzantine period. By tracing correlations between climatic changes and social developments, Rosen reveals the patterns and mechanisms of successful adaptations as well as unfortunate failures, with the declared purpose "to stimulate critical thinking on the subject of humans and their changing environments, as a rebuttal to more simplistic models of Pavlovian stimulus/response" (p. 173). The basic argument going through all the examined periods and resulting from the different sets of data is as anti-deterministic as can be: past societies used different strategies to cope with climate change and had different speeds of reaction toward it. It has been a two-way process; the impact of climatic conditions on societies ("civilizing factors") combined with the influence societies had on their environment ("civilizing forces") in shaping historical developments (p. 172). The various strategies societies implemented were a result not only of different levels of technological development, but also of different political, economic, and religious practices. Human societies, then, experienced stressful "push factors" as well as tempting "pull factors" driving their adaptation processes (p. 118). Rosen attacks the common assumption that climate changes had a monolithic influence on societies as a whole, and argues that, in every given time, climate change had a different impact on different social groups within a given society (p. 147). Think, for instance, how a sudden flood has a very different impact on subsistence farmers who lose all their crops, on the one hand, versus merchants and magnates who have big reserves of foods whose prices may skyrocket within a day, on the other.

Many environmental historians still do not have the luxury of working in academic institutions wholly dedicated to their field. Working under the auspices of different academic departments, we regularly face the task of explaining what we are doing to both "classical" historians and "natural" scientists. *Civilizing Climate* helps a

bit in carrying out this task, adding a brick to the bridge being rebuilt between the social sciences and the natural ones. The author urges social scientists to get acquainted with the technical methods (palinology and geomorphology, for instance) used by climatologists (p. 31), and encourages natural scientists to include clear "humanistic" factors (such as social structures and religious beliefs) in their attempts to reconstruct past environmental processes (p. 120).

Rosen, then, is very much aware of the delicate seam connecting "culture" and "nature." Referring to the late Holocene, she writes that "the part of the period before written records is probably the most challenging of all time stages for the reconstruction of changing climate" (p. 89). This might be a thrilling playground for environmental historians—with big, clear, and evident signs for human deeds and actions, but still without the supernatural force of the documented lingual testimony. Clearly, the more recent the period studied the less palinological and isotope evidence and the more archeological and written records are used. This, in turn, brings us back to a classic historiographic dilemma of the kind of "who should we trust?" Objectively, the more developed the society the more complex are its relations with the environment. Subjectively, the more distant in time we are from a certain past society the more inaccurate and vague is our knowledge of it. The mist of the past is made thicker, then, by both sides of the time gap. This may well teach us historians some humility.

A final message of this book is that more than the climatic situation per se it is the climate's stability or instability that influences people's adaptation to it. People are able to adapt themselves to many different and even extreme conditions, if they have the awareness about the change, knowledge of how to cope with it, and enough time to do so (pp. 168-169). Different human societies in the Levant have successfully adapted to dryer, wetter, cooler, and warmer climatic condi-

tions in the past. But when change is too sudden, then adaptation is much more difficult. To use an actual contemporary parallel, it is neither the Bulls nor the Bears one should be afraid of, but the level of "markets volatility."

To continue in a similar vein, a society's level of complexity alone gives no guarantee against deterioration or collapse. Although an empire might provide more buffers, checks and balances to backup agricultural communities in regions with only marginal farming conditions, its survival strategies are not by definition "safer" than those of a small hunter-gatherers community. A good lesson from the book is to take with limited warranty the promises of those Rosen calls "modernity Priests" (p. 180). The brief last chapter of this book, therefore, can teach something to all those celebrating prosperity and abundance nowadays without paying due attention to the future of the economic structures on which they rely.

Altogether, this book can serve well many different publics. Those interested in the history of the Levant will find here an excellent survey of its prewritten and classical history, paleologists will find another case study of antiquity research, sociologists can be helped in putting together models of human behavior, and politologists may find an example of what a crisis in great empires might look like. And those short on time can learn a quick lesson: the future of our society lies—at least to a certain extent—in our own hands.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

**Citation:** Dan Tamir. Review of Rosen, Arlene Miller. *Civilizing Climate: Social Responses to Climate Change in the Ancient Near East*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. December, 2007.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13961>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No  
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.