

## Book review

**The destruction of Sodom: A scientific commentary.** *Graham Harris*, The Lutterworth Press, Cambridge, 2015, £20, paperback, 216 pp., ISBN: 978-0-7188-9368-2

When one receives a book to review with a title like this one, many reviewers might be tempted to discard it out of hand, particularly those without a religious bent. In my case I puzzled over whether or not, once the book was read and the review written, to lodge it amongst my books on archaeology or in the little corner that I reserved for my late father-in-law's small collection of the works of Erich Von Daniken. On reflection, and after writing the body of this review, I have come to the conclusion that it belongs in the former, but at the speculative end of the spectrum.

There are plenty of genuinely historical places the names of which are known only from a single document, laboriously copied time after time by monks and merely surviving by chance. Equally, there are numerous examples of fairly major human settlements that have been overwhelmed by natural catastrophes, some of which settlements have been uncovered only by chance. Moreover, ancient writers were not particularly sophisticated in describing natural phenomena, or used imagery we might not recognize today. It is therefore possible to believe (without taking on board the entirety of the biblical account) that there once was a small city named Sodom that was destroyed by natural means, and possibly one day it will be discovered and the cause of its disappearance properly established.

On the other hand, literature contains clear examples of human settlements that are purely imaginary: the original Utopia and the bizarre places visited in Gulliver's travels. Some of these meet their doom to illustrate the authors' inventiveness or to provide the vehicle for a homily on morals.

Where the existence or otherwise of a place is uncertain, but we have a name, as in the case for example of Atlantis, then the literature may arise attributing it to this or that place; in the case of Atlantis to the Minoan centre in Crete, with its destruction related to an eruption of the volcano forming the island of Santorini. The present volume follows that meme, elaborating on Graham Harris's

paper on the subject that appeared in QJEGH in 1995 (Harris & Beardow 1995).

The book is over 200 pages long including the front matter, and is illustrated with photographs and diagrams. I found it a little disappointing that among the illustrations there was not a good geological map, nor a map that showed the tectonic setting of the area, but anyone taking a serious interest in the subject probably has those already. The cover illustration comes from a mid-19th-century apocalyptic painting of the destruction by John Martin.

Harris has allowed himself to discuss earthquakes and landslides as mechanisms, and also to discuss the reasons why settlements could grow in what is today a relatively arid location by invoking past climate and water levels in the Dead Sea, together with relict river channels and a postulated trade in natural bitumen. It was in connection with the last that I most missed the geological map.

The book was pulled together posthumously following the death of the author in 2014, and perhaps some deficiencies result from that. I came away from reading it convinced that Sodom had once been a real place, but unsure precisely what had destroyed it, as I found the discussion rather speculative in the absence of discovery of the real remains of the settlement. There was too much of the 'it could be' in the text, and I would have found it more convincing if the answer was genuinely known.

In the end, I decided that it had been an interesting read, but that perhaps Gomorrah sometimes hides behind its better-known neighbour, lacking its fame and its connection in the popular imagination to miscellaneous forms of wickedness!

### Reference

Harris, G.M. & Beardow, A.P. 1995. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah: a geotechnical perspective. *Quarterly Journal of Engineering Geology*, **28**, 349–362, <http://doi.org/10.1144/GSL.QJEGH.1995.028.P4.04>

Eddie Bromhead  
QJEGH Chief Scientific Editor  
[edward@bromheadconsulting.com](mailto:edward@bromheadconsulting.com)  
doi: 10.1144/qjegh2016-040