Year 536 Was the Worst Year to be Alive – What Happened?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3YTfhJmh1I

Transcript: http://dontveter.com/ec/year536.pdf

The term "worst year ever" gets tossed around a lot these days, mostly on the internet, and for reasons like, I was disappointed in the latest Star Wars movie.

But scientists and historians have actually argued that no year in the long history of this planet was worse than the year 536.

While, sure, there have been plenty of worthy contenders for the worst year ever over the course of history, no single year has had more of a measurably bad impact for the decades that followed.

Today, we're going to explain why the year 536 was the worst year to be alive.

But before we get started, be sure to subscribe to the Weird History Channel.

Oh, and leave a comment too, and let us know what piece of history you would like us to explain next.

OK, now let's settle this once and for all-- year 536, worst year ever.

While serving as a military advisor to Belisaurius, one of the Byzantine Empire's most distinguished generals, Byzantine historian Procopius noticed some trouble was brewing in the air while traveling with his boss in Sicily in the year 536.

Byzantium was an ancient Greek city in classical antiquity that became known as Constantinople in late antiquity and Istanbul today. T

he Greek name *Byzantion* and its Latinization *Byzantium* continued to be used as a name of Constantinople sporadically and to varying degrees during the thousand year existence of the Byzantine Empire.

Byzantium was colonized by Greeks from Megara in the 7th century BC and remained primarily Greek-speaking until its conquest by the Ottoman Empire in AD 1453.

He wrote of a sun that gave forth light without brightness, during like the moon, during this whole year.

And it seemed exceedingly like the sun in eclipse for the beams it shed were not clear nor such as it is accustomed to shed.

Translated, it was all dark outside, like, all the time.

He, of course, wasn't the only one to notice the sun appeared to be in a mood during 536.

Michael the Syrian, a Byzantine scribe, would later write of this period, "The sun became dark and its darkness lasted for 18 months.

Each day it shone for about four hours, and still this light was only a feeble shadow.

Everyone declared that the sun would never recover its full light.

The fruits did not ripen and the wine tasted like sour grapes."

This wishy-washy sun situation cast a non-metaphorical dark cloud over the globe that darkened the sky for at least a full year in 536.

Researchers later discovered evidence of a massive volcanic eruption whose ash was likely a major contributor to the Seattle-like weather, minus all the rain, spreading ash and destruction on a global scale.

Not to mention, it made the grapes sour and the wine bad.

So that's an easy strike for the year 536.

Basic biology teaches us that plants need the sun to aid in their growth and survival.

So not having direct sunlight for the duration of at least a year did a real number on the crop output around the world and sparked a widespread famine around the globe.

And it's not just that the plants wanted to catch their rays, it was just too darn chilly for crops to grow.

With the sun cloaked in an endless cloud, the temperature of the Earth dropped between 1.6 and 2.5 degrees Celsius, or 34.88 to 36.5 degrees Fahrenheit for all the Americans thinking that doesn't sound so bad.

But it also cooled temperatures for decades to come.

Crop scarcities were reported far and wide around this time period, including Ireland, who suffered through their own horrible sounding food depletion they called "Bread Failure."

A dusty veil covering the sun wasn't the only bad thing in the air for these poor people just trying to live their lives in 536.

There was also a plague or two waiting in the wings to strike on these vitamin D-deprived immune systems.

Nobody was immune to this infestation. It swept through the lower classes all the way to the Imperial Palace.

"Symptoms," as it was lovingly described, began with a sore that formed on the palm of the hand and progressed until the afflicted one could not take a step.

The leg swelled. Then the buboes burst and pus came out.

bubo in American English

NOUN

Word forms: plural ˈ**bu ˌboes**

an inflamed swelling of a lymph node, esp. in the armpit or groin

Derived forms

bubonic (buˈbonic) (ˈbjuˈbɑnık)

Obviously, if this same plague were to infect the world today, there would probably be a TV show called Doctor Buboes, Pus Buster, and with it a new contender for the worst year to be alive.

With the plague beginning to make the rounds in Constantinople, the city began to stink, what with the piles of dead sick bodies just sort of being tossed around into the sea, only to resurface later.

There wasn't a lot of burial planning going around back then.

Bring out your dead!

There was more of a "wing it" vibe around the Justinian Plague.

Emperor Justinian ordered the bodies to be removed from the city.

I'm not dead. Oh, he says he's not dead. Yes, he is. I'm not!

But all that did was expose more people to the disease, as healthy people were responsible for moving deceased, sickly bodies out of the cities.

Things weren't all bad for Emperor Justinian though, as the plague that took all of these lives and made the city a smelly nightmare would later be named the "Plague of Justinian."

So that was probably nice for him.

Less so, for the estimated 50 million people that died from it, however.

Around 536, the climate in China started its journey into madness, doing perfectly normal things like raining dust you could scoop into your hands.

Not only should it not rain dust, it certainly shouldn't be measurable by the scoopful.

The Nan Shi, a sixth century chronicle, reported a yellow ash-like substance falling from the sky.

They named their freak weather hui, or dust, and said it was yellow in color.

Whether this was volcanic ash or just some random unexplained climate reaction is not known.

However, this was just the beginning of China's climate disruption.

The chronicles of the southern dynasties reported on a rare summer-winter weather event with frost in the mid-summer and snow in August.

Like a Southern California girl in Chicago in January, the crops were not here for this cold snap. Summer crops were destroyed.

And the city of [? Xinzhou, ?] along with others, were thrown into a deadly famine that lasted for two years and resulted in the deaths of around 70% to 80% of the population.

Researchers discovered evidence deep in the ice sheets of Iceland and Greenland that indicated a major volcanic event occurred around 536.

Volcanic eruptions in Iceland in 540 and 547 thrust people into the literal Dark Ages, with ash lining the skies and blocking out the shiny, hot sun thing in the sky that the people of the 6th century were starting to get used to having around.

Based on a tropical volcanic ash later discovered, some scholars have suggested a volcano in El Salvador went blasting off around the year 535 or 536.

Still others pointed to a volcanic eruption in North America as a contributor to the dark skies around the world.

When combined with the two Icelandic volcano eruptions, it kicked off what was adorably called the “Late Antique Little Ice Age”.

This cute little ice age cooled off the planet for at least a decade and resulted in the death of crops and, subsequently, people.

Both directly through starvation and indirectly, a malnourished population was more susceptible to diseases, of which there were plenty running around.

Well, there's one thing that certainly couldn't claim it had a bad year-- exploding volcanoes.

By the time the 6th century rolled around, the Romans had migrated east to Constantinople.

And, under the guiding hand of Emperor Justinian, the Romans sought to get back to the glory days of the empire, much like a high school graduate who still hangs around campus and wears their letterman jacket.

I mean, it is pretty cool.

Though some of Justinian's generals saw success in this cool goal-- most notable, Belisaurius, who fought against several different armies, including Goths, Vandals, and others-- Justinian himself couldn't mirror the success due to constant uprisings and imperial instability.

Those pesky uprisings, always getting in the way of success.

To add sickness to war defeats, the Byzantine Empire would never fully recover from the disease and famine sparked by the events of 536.

The Byzantine Empire lost between 35% to 55% of their population in the year 541.

Once the bubonic plague moved in, it did what the plague did best-- kill depressingly high percentages of entire populations.

Historians believe the plague could have been transported by plague-infested rats hitching a ride on military trains during this attempt to bring the Roman Empire back to its peak, which clearly backfired.

The horribleness of 536 didn't discriminate. The Moche civilization of Peru wouldn't count 536 as their banner year either.

The Moche civilization-- a once dominant force in the region-- were known to be avid fishermen and developers of an advanced irrigation system that allowed a variety of crops to grow.

Their agricultural talents were the backbone of their economy. But the weather conditions in the 6th century caused their pocketbooks to take a deep hit.

It was around this time that an unusually strong El Niño weather system caused waters to warm, which decimated the fish supply.

The freak weather system also caused heavy flooding, which ruined their irrigation systems and devastated their ability to grow enough food to feed their people.

People, probably tired of listening to Twitter users claim X and X was the worst year ever, a group of scholars set out to set the record straight once and for all.

Harvard historian Michael McCormick and a group of scholars decided to science their way out of the age-old question, what was the worst year to be alive?

Initially, however, this was not the ultimate goal of McCormick and his group of 12 interdisciplinary scholars.

The group came together to study metal usage, coinage, and changes to the 7th century monetary systems.

Somewhere in this thrilling subject matter, one probably began to ponder if they were living in the worst year to be alive.

Their findings included an analysis of volcanic fragments from an Icelandic volcano in ice core samples from Swiss glaciers that, yes, dated back to 536, confirming the volcanic event that thrusted a good portion of the northern hemisphere into unprecedented darkness, setting off a global catastrophe.

Yeah, but in 1998, both Armageddon and Deep Impact were released.

And people had to choose between which two asteroid-based action movies they liked best. That's a tough year.

The planet left behind plenty of evidence of climate trauma that resulted in a chain of climate events that spiraled over into real human suffering.

Remember, we only get one Earth, everyone. Please recycle.

Dendrochronologists, people who study tree rings to determine a tree's age since that's a science and not a wild guess, noticed some disturbing patterns emerging when examining Icelandic trees.

The rings indicated a period when the tree's growth had slowed, suggesting a significant cool down had occurred around the middle of the sixth century.

This, combined with the newly unearthed ice core evidence discovered in 2018, helped date the time of the catastrophic event that ruined Earth, for a little bit, to the year 536.

In researching for the worst year to be alive, things weren't always so bleak.

In fact, the research started by our friends at Harvard ended on a positive note.

While the events of 536 were the spark for some truly literal dark days in our planet's history, the researchers were also able to find the moments things really started to turn around.

When researching coinage, they noticed the reappearance of lead in the ice core samples, indicating that people were producing silver again for money.

Ah, capitalism, the life force of us all.

Experts argued the prevalence of silver meant more coins were being produced, which was a sign of a thriving economy.

The lesson being, as bad as it may seem, it will almost always get better, almost always.

So what do you think? Would you like to go into a time machine and play the ultimate game of Survivor? Let us know in the comments below.

And, while you're at it, check out some of these other videos from our Weird History.