Learning from Disaster from Antiquity to Early Modern Times. Knowledge and Experience, Flow and Blockage

Veranstalter: Gerrit J. Schenk; Junior Research Group (JRG) „Cultures of Disaster. Shifting Asymmetries between Societies, Cultures, and Nature from a Comparative Historical and Transcultural Perspective“, Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies, Rupprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg
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There's hardly a need to refer to the current debate on climate change when stating that man's future is – among other factors – projected from historical experience; an approach all too common in other discussions, too. But what can we actually learn from history, in particular from natural disasters? For a while now, historians have become more and more skeptical of describing their discipline as 'historia magistra vitae'. This time the third workshop in Heidelberg dealing with natural disasters wanted to clarify this question with a focus on pre-modern cultures of Asia and Europe.

Host GERRIT J. SCHENK (Heidelberg/Darmstadt) underlined in his introduction the social conditioning of experience and knowledge. The reliability of our knowledge about historical disasters is indeed questionable: Even if historical sources on disasters were examined critically, it was often unacknowledged that the interpretation of disasters is culturally determined. Only the Florentine chronicler Giovanni Villani reports an earthquake hitting his hometown in 1333, followed by a huge flood of the river Arno. Most likely, the eartquake never happened: According to ancient-medieval theories on the origins of large floods, they occurred when earthquakes pressed large amounts of subterranean water to the surface. In the author's eyes, a huge flood like that in 1333 must have been spurred by an earthquake. Moreover, Schenk doubted the validity of comparing a 14th century society with today's: What can historiography that turned to be 'orientative knowledge' (Koselleck) teach a modern society? Apart from pragmatic learning from natural disasters – e.g. which areas are vulnerable to floods –, Schenk followed Bruno Latour and identified the stimulus of history by emphasizing the hybrid relation between nature and culture.

The danger of earthquakes was quite familiar to ancient Assyria, as STEFAN MAUL (Heidelberg) demonstrated: On the one hand, the power of the Assyrian kings was compared to the destructive power of an earthquake. But if the ground of their own empire shook, their rulership tended to become unstable. The intellectual elite, mainly priestly scholars, traced the anomalous acts of nature back to man's, maybe the king's mistakes. The gods articulated a warning, and further calamity was to be expected. No wonder that Assyrian governors had strict orders to report any earthquake to the king, which maybe explains the extraordinarily good sources on this topic. Luckily, the astrologers could offer the king an appropriate solution. In a ritual of penitence, including the shaving off of the king's hair, the threat could be transferred to the neighboring empires. In the discussion, this semiotization of mischief was pointed out as accomplishment of Mesopotamian culture. Astrology and other techniques made disasters calculable and hence understandable.

More difficult was the situation with Egypt, as JOACHIM FRIEDRICH QUACK (Heidelberg) explained. The relevant sources date mainly from later periods. Like in Assyria, astrology played an important role: The first annual viewing of the star Sirius allowed predictions concerning the upcoming year. Forecasts were given either for the whole country or for the ruler only. Not surprisingly, the flooding of the Nile was a foremost concern, followed by information on harvests, death of kings or high officials. Most of the prophecies seem contradictory: A lot of disasters were announced, but hardly any are reported to have happened; ritual countermeasures were probably thought to be quite effective. So it seems that ancient Egyptians learned more from predicted than actual disasters.

From a Jewish perspective, disasters are not a matter of prognosis, but of backward pro-

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jection. Current events are often compared to past catastrophes such as the destruction of the Temple or biblical plagues, as JULIA ITIN (Halle/Heidelberg) underlined in her presentation. The calendar repeats Jewish history with three outstanding elements: Exodus, exile and redemption: The Exodus created a Jewish people, while the ten plagues seem like creation going in reverse. Jewish sources during the crusades actually report pogroms where water turned to blood. Even modern historiography compares the bubonic plague to the „death angel that stops at the Jewish lane" – supposedly due to the higher hygienic standards to which the Jews adhered. Exile is remembered by two holidays, and Israel can be compared to Noe's dove finding no place to rest. Redemption will finally be achieved by the birth of the Messiah, accompanied by disasters. In line with this idea, political-historical defeat is reinterpreted as moral victory. These narrative patterns of Jewish history define historical events not as unique occurrences, but as prototypes; disasters can be precursors of the messianic time.

As an art historian, ANJA EISENBEISS (Heidelberg) approached the phenomenon of cross-like signs appearing on human bodies, which can be traced back to the 11th century. Other signs are characterized as crosses or 'arma Christi' falling from heaven. These signs were described in several treatises by Joseph Grunpeck, a German historiographer and secretary to Emperor Maximilian I. and in other books of the time. Eisenbeiß focused her presentation on the differences between text and the set of images used to illustrate them. Grunpeck tended to historicize these signs when he showed historical personalities like Darius and Xerxes facing the same phenomenon. The depiction of Emperor Maximilian discussing their origin in combination with the text, where all kinds of explanation are given, reveals that Maximilian and his contemporaries are not ruled by these supernatural events, but rather that they try to explain and thereby control them.

The example of Siena was chosen by FABRIZIO NEVOLA (Oxford/Bath) to illustrate the depiction of earthquakes in Renaissance Italy, a topic that up to now found little scholarly attention. The cover of a particular volume of Sienese financial records shows the official interpretation of an earthquake that hit Siena in the late 15th century. The mother of God protects the city under her coat; it is not the catastrophe that is shown, but the miracle preventing the disaster. It seems quite typical that divine protection or punishment is represented rather than the actual experience of an earthquake, which is not shown. The only visible indication of an earthquake were the tents outside the seemingly unharmed city. The disaster itself cannot be shown, as it would reveal the disturbed relationship between the city and its saintly protector (here and in most cases Mary). The same is true for images depicting protection against the plague; victims of the disease are displayed only beyond the protective coat of Mary.

GRÉGORY QUENET (Paris/Versailles) first gave the conference an insider and historian's view on historical seismology. Founded as ancillary science for nuclear safety in the 1970s, it had to serve very particular interests and in the beginning no historians were involved at all. This created typical problems like the missing contextualization of sources, which moreover were often not primary sources. As a result, a majority of French earthquake catalogs were not reliable. In particular, when written records were turned into statistics, the construction of data remained little more than a 'black box'. As a consequence of this, Quenet pled for a multi-disciplinary, in-depth analysis of natural disasters like earthquakes. From his experience, the openness of natural scientists to cooperate with historians is growing.

Powder snow avalanches were examined by CHRISTIAN ROHR (Salzburg) with the methods of cultural history. There are few sources before 1700 since the afflicted regions of the Alps were hardly settled or not yet alphabetized. He presented two avalanche disasters (Mittewald, 1456/1689 and Schneeberg, 1580) and the way their memory was preserved. The contemporaries had no explanation for avalanches, which were depicted as huge snow balls. Nonetheless, they practiced a kind of risk management by avoiding settling in endangered regions, preserving forests and adapting their residential buildings. But obviously around 1800 this culture

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of memory was banned (Borst), which in the end contributed significantly to the avalanche disaster of Galtür in 1999.

Quite skeptical of the possibilities of historical learning, CORNEL ZWIERLEIN (Bochum) gave first an Early Modern theory of oblivion. Macchiavelli thought of natural disasters as the actors of a collective loss of memory, while the historian Scipione Ammirato claimed that a dearth of authors was responsible for the missing records. City fires in Germany since the 13th century then were his practical object of investigation, but he found it hard to see any progress in security measures. It was hardly surprising that the peak numbers of city fires occurred in times of war. The number of fires decreased only from the beginning of the 19th century, no process of learning could be spotted earlier. It was only the developing state from the 17th century onwards that got more and more involved in fire prevention, but it acted independently from the communal level.

In his evening lecture JAN ASSMANN (Heidelberg/Konstanz) correlated the recent book „Thera" from Israeli author Zeruya Shalev with the well-known volcanic eruption (ca. 1620-1640 BC) in the Aegean Sea that plays an essential role in the mentioned book. In a short review, Assman outlined that the idea of human culture shaped by natural disasters is much older than Velikovsky, going back to Nicolas Antoine Boulanger who saw the origins of religion and culture in a reaction to the Deluge. Coming back to the book, the lecture followed the leading character's growing knowledge of the volcanic disaster and its traces left in human memory. The protagonist, a female archeologist, changes and develops her theories on Thera, and Assmann connected this with current academic debate, e.g. on the historic background of the ten biblical plagues and Platon's Atlantis myth.

THOMAS LABBÉ (Dijon) presented the results of his PhD thesis on the territory along the river Doubs in the French Jura. Since the beginning of the 14th century the river's course changed frequently, destroying on the one hand valuable farm land, creating on the other hand new, fertile ground (*accreue*). The losses were documented in the accounts of the local castellany, since the former owners asked for tax reductions. From the 1420s on the duke of Burgundy, as proprietor of the newly emerged land, sold it by auction. But to develop a kind of loss and gain management system took decades; the people responsible needed time to realize how the landscape changed. But this is true for the case of the village Chaussin only, because other settlements located on the river Doubs found different, more short-term reactions to this 'disaster'.

Host GERRIT J. SCHENK (Darmstadt/Heidelberg) studied the relation of social structure and natural forces by looking at two comparable cities, Florence and Strasbourg, and their way of dealing with regular flooding in the late Middle Ages. In doing so he hoped to find traces of institutional learning. Indeed dam building started in Florence from 1330 after a phase of improvisation. Initially, the responsibility for doing so was controversial inside the city, but was later standardized and centralized in the 15th century. In Strasbourg the regulations of the river Ill were organized collectively by the 'Illsassen', who acted explicitly for the common good. Although multilateral treaties predominated for a long time, only in 1530 was flood protection institutionalized. Institutional learning can in this case be regarded as state building from below. It was policy, law and mentality that determined how a society coped with disasters. Damage prevention became a strategy of political legitimization, therefore Schenk saw early traces of *gouvernementalité* (Foucault).

An always lively discussion soon revealed that learning from disasters was and still is difficult. Historians definitely need a longue-durée-view on their topic. The perception of the disaster at the time was of outmost importance, since it determined any solution strategy. The participants found no unanimous answer to the question of whether learning from disaster is possible. Sometimes there were local 'cultures of memory' that learned pragmatically. In some cases the experts of the 19th century onwards were blamed for undermining local disaster prevention. One can also see a story of success, with man now able for example to settle in regions it would have been unimaginable to inhabit in

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the past. Thinking about learning and disasters will go on, and common international and multidisciplinary efforts like a European integrated database of natural phenomena in history would be beneficial in advancing our understanding.

Conference overview:

Gerrit J. Schenk (Heidelberg/Darmstadt): Welcome and Introduction. Learning from Historical Disasters and the Limits of our Knowledge.

Chair: Diamantis Panagiotopoulos (Heidelberg)

Stefan Maul (Heidelberg): Earthquakes in Assyria.

Joachim Friedrich Quack (Heidelberg): „Assur will suffer". Predicting disaster in Ancient Egypt.

Julia Itin (Halle/Heidelberg): „At first, I escaped into the past to forget the threatening and perilous present...." - Disaster paradigms of Jewish history.

Chair: Monica Juneja (Heidelberg)

Anja Eisenbeiß (Heidelberg): Dealing with disaster in German courtly society: The impact of visual imagery.

Fabrizio Nevola (Oxford/Bath): Picturing with disaster in Renaissance Italy.

Grégory Quenet (Paris/Versailles): What did we learn from historical earthquakes in France? State of the art and new perspectives.

Chair: Salvatore Ciriacono (Padova)

Christian Pfister (Bern): „France has never witnessed such a disaster!" Reflections on the cultural memory of disasters in Western Europe, 1700-2007 [cancelled].

Christian Rohr (Salzburg): From Mittewald (1456) to Galtür (1999). Risk management and (not) learning from avalanche disasters in the (Eastern) Alps.

Cornel Zwierlein (Bochum): Forgetting disasters. On the often missing causal link between fire catastrophes and the development of security regimes in early modern cities (16th-19th C.).

Jan Assmann (Heidelberg/Konstanz): The Thera disaster and the archives of human memory. Zeruya Shalevs novel 'Thera' (public evening lecture).

Chair: Klaus Oschema (Bern)

Thomas Labbé (Dijon): Economic Adaptation to Changing Landscape in the Late Middle Ages: the Case of the „accreues" of the Doubs in Chaussin (Jura, France) from c. 1370 to c. 1500.

Gerrit J. Schenk (Darmstadt/Heidelberg): Managing the risk of floods in the Upper Rhine Valley and Tuscany in the Renaissance (ca. 1270-1560).

Margrit Seckelmann (Speyer): Public and private tasks in disaster management: From the ‚gute policey' to ‚good governance' [cancelled].

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