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Introduction

Floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, storm tides, hail and forest-fires have always troubled humankind. Only in recent times, however, have serious historical studies been published about these and other natural disasters and their effects on human life. So far, natural catastrophes have been largely neglected by historians as relevant factors in history, because in the nineteenth century historiography had begun to externalise natural phenomena as accidental facts, by focusing on man as the only or decisive actor of history.

More than twenty years ago the German historian Arno Borst claimed that natural disasters were widely ignored in modern historiography.¹ Obviously, the situation has changed since that time. In today's debates on environmental affairs natural disasters are interpreted as possible signs of climatic change. Consequently, modern research activities on climate have begun to include catastrophes of the past, too; that can be seen, for instance, in the growing number of actualised catalogues of historical earthquakes. Meanwhile, the young historiographical discipline of environmental history has started to focus not only on long-term climatic changes from the Middle Ages to present times, but also on sudden impacts of natural forces. At the same time, natural disasters have been taken back on to the agenda of the social and cultural sciences – as initiators for technical innovations, as exemplars of human strategies of coping with contingency, or as parts of cultural memories providing collective identity or solidarity. Several case studies and monographs have appeared.² In the last decade, research activities in the field have intensified in Europe and America. Conferences have been organised, volumes have been published.³ Recently, historians of urban history have discovered this topic, too.⁴

Finally, natural disasters have become an object of international comparative studies. At the second conference of the European Society for Environmental History, which will take place in Prague September 2003, there will be three sections on the topic; while the World Conference of Historians, to be held in Sydney in 2005, will deal with 'Les catastrophes naturelles et leurs suites' (natural disasters and how they have been dealt with) in the section 'Humanité et nature dans l'histoire' (humankind and nature in history).

In 1989, the General Assembly of the United Nations declared the subsequent ten years the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. During and since this period the relationship between man and nature has been changing fundamentally. Man's role has slipped more and more from that of victim into that of perpetrator. Environment and climate are now seen to be influenced by humans. In this respect, natural catastrophes that are caused, at least partially, by humans can be termed ecological disasters. Hence, such catastrophic events are often referred to (especially in the mass media) as nature's acts of revenge. This seems to be a metaphorical successor of the early modern interpretation of natural disasters as acts of vengeance by God, punishing man for his moral

depravities. However, 'nature' and 'natural disaster' are defined by humans. These definitions are constructions that can alter and change in different cultures, and in the same culture in different times. While we have to acknowledge that interpretations of natural disasters differ, we could ask whether there are general patterns of perceiving and coping with such events. Some people might say that the foundation of anthropological theories is no firmer than the shaking ground of an earthquake. Seeking such universal schemes of how man perceives and deals with natural disasters must necessarily involve the labour-intensive building up of an archive of such catastrophic experiences – an archive that will, of course, never be completed. However, the essays of this special issue should be read as efforts towards at least one step forward in that direction.

In the papers that follow, a leading research theme is a focus on perceptions of natural disasters. Perceptions are based on certain word-views or patterns of interpretations. For instance, in early modern times natural catastrophes were often interpreted as signs of God's anger towards a sinful mankind. Different types of interpretations can exist simultaneously: for example, in pre-modern times some catastrophic events were regarded as evidence of divine wrath and, at the same time, as products of witchcraft. Moreover, interpretations of natural disasters present us with the opportunity to discover certain views of nature that lay behind those interpretations. This fact can be seen, for example, in the diverging concepts of the biblical deluge in early modern times, as one essay in this special issue demonstrates. If we may assume, on the one hand, that natural disasters were perceived within the frames of different world-views, we could also ask, on the other hand, whether such catastrophes were able to shake or, even to break, those patterns. As another article in this issue demonstrates, the earthquake of Lisbon in 1755 engendered a pluralisation and differentiation of world-views, rather than the mere fracture and destruction of a single world-view, viz. the view of the early Enlightenment that 'we live in the best of all possible worlds'.⁵

From the perspective of systems theory we can also interpret natural disasters as events of contingency, which are able to evoke 'noises' or 'irritations' triggering variations in social systems. In this sense, the earthquake of Noto in 1693 caused a fundamental reorganisation of the legal structures in this Italian town.⁶ A focus on natural disasters can, therefore, offer the possibility of retrieving accident and contingency as important historical factors in historiography.

The articles by Christian Rohr, Michael Kempe and Martin Doering are based on papers presented at the first international conference of the European Society for Environmental History, in St Andrews, Scotland, 5–8 September 2001. All the articles reflect the idea of analysing different ways of perceiving, coping and handling with natural disasters as a means of studying the relationship between man and nature from a perspective of a modern environmental history. The essays cover different aspects of that topic within European culture from the Middle Ages to the late twentieth century. The last article, from Monika

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Gisler, goes beyond this, in offering a systematic approach to a critical analysis of modern historical seismology.

Re-visiting sources dealing with the famous Villach earthquake of 1348, Christian Rohr investigates how people experienced this disaster. He detects that the natural catastrophe was primarily experienced, not as a blow of divine retribution for man's sin, but rather as an unexpected part of (daily) life. As Michael Kempe explains, different interpretations of the biblical deluge can give us an idea of various modes of perception of natural disasters in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In analysing these interpretations, we learn much about early modern European ways of thinking about nature, mankind and the relationship between the two. Martin Stuber examines the resonance of natural catastrophes in the correspondence network of the 'universal scholar' Albrecht von Haller (1708–77). In Haller's European network of communication Stuber discovers a rapid exchange of individual observations as well as intense discussion about competing interpretations. In his paper on the great Odra flood of 1997, Martin Doering investigates the mass media reports of that tremendous event. He analyses in much detail how the media discourse on this flood disaster served as a metaphorical reservoir that could be instrumentalised for the political process of German reunification. Finally, Monika Gisler argues in her paper that seismologists should adopt historians' methods of source criticism for the evaluation of their historical sources. As a part of a dialogue between seismologists and historians, she also demands the inclusion of investigations of human perceptions alongside a merely data-related analysis. By focusing on human perceptions, the five articles all claim to study natural disasters from the perspective of historical anthropology, and thus to open a new field of research for a self-reflexive environmental history.

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NOTES

¹ Borst 1981.

² See, for example, Waldherr 1997; and Sonnabend 1999 for ancient times, and Berlioz 1998 for the Middle Ages.

³ See, for instance, Guidoboni 1989; Bennisar 1996; Olshausen and Sonnabend 1998; Münch 2001; Pfister 2002, Kempe, Groh and Muelshagen 2003.

⁴ See Körner 1999/2000; Massard-Guilbaud, Platt and Schott 2002.

⁵ For the older view, see Günther 1994.

⁶ Luminati 1995.

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