

Past Vulnerability

*Volcanic eruptions and human vulnerability
in traditional societies past and present*

Edited by Felix Riede



Laboratory for Past
Disaster Science

Volcanic eruptions and
prehistoric culture change

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Past Vulnerability

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Chapter 8

Coping with disasters in Antiquity and the Bible: Practical and mental strategies

Jan Dietrich

Abstract

Disastrous events can have many faces, but the most significant ones in the ancient Near East pertain to drought and famine, earthquakes, flooding, wars and epidemic plagues, and the ancient civilisations used different practical methods described in this article to cope with these forms of disaster. Next to these practical methods, cultural meaning making and mental coping strategies are important to increase resilience capacities. For the ancient civilisations, the cause for the disaster is neither characterised by extreme complexity nor does it demonstrate a rampant, impersonal face; instead, it is reduced in its complexity and captured in personal relationships. Tracing back extremely complex catastrophic events to a small number of personalised causes reduces complexity, which does not neglect life's ambivalence but facilitates understanding, creates meaning, and integrates disaster in the ancient worldviews. Since ambivalence, even with its potentially destructive and disastrous consequences, remains part of the worldview, the given culture responds to disappointment with composure and a relatively high frustration tolerance. A worldview that accounts for ambivalence possesses backdoors through which mental coping strategies are free to enter the stage. In this article, four mental strategies used for coping with disasters and conducted via the media of narrative, art, and ritual are highlighted, namely aestheticising, moralising, pedagogising and the creation of rituals of performance.

Introduction

In the following sections I will aim to first define disasters, then provide an overview of the most important practical answers in dealing with disasters in Antiquity, namely droughts and famines, earthquakes, flooding, wars and epidemic plagues. Following this, I will aim to highlight the importance of cultural meaning-making pertaining to some prominent strategic mental pathways for coping with disastrous events, namely aestheticising, moralising, creating rituals of performance, and finally pedagogising. The ancient civilisations dealt with in this chapter are the civilisations of the ancient Near East and Classical Antiquity, ranging geographically from Egypt

and Italy in the west to Anatolia and Mesopotamia in the east, and chronologically, in this article, from about 2500 BC until about AD 100 (Figure 1).

Defining catastrophe and disaster

According to Olaf Briese and Timo Günther (2009, 157-163), the Greek verb καταστρέφω carries different meanings, including 'to subjugate' and 'to die'; however, first and foremost, it means 'to overturn' or 'to upset'. The corresponding noun καταστροφή also hints at the 'upheaval' or 'turning point' of situations, actions or orders, while the poetological mean-

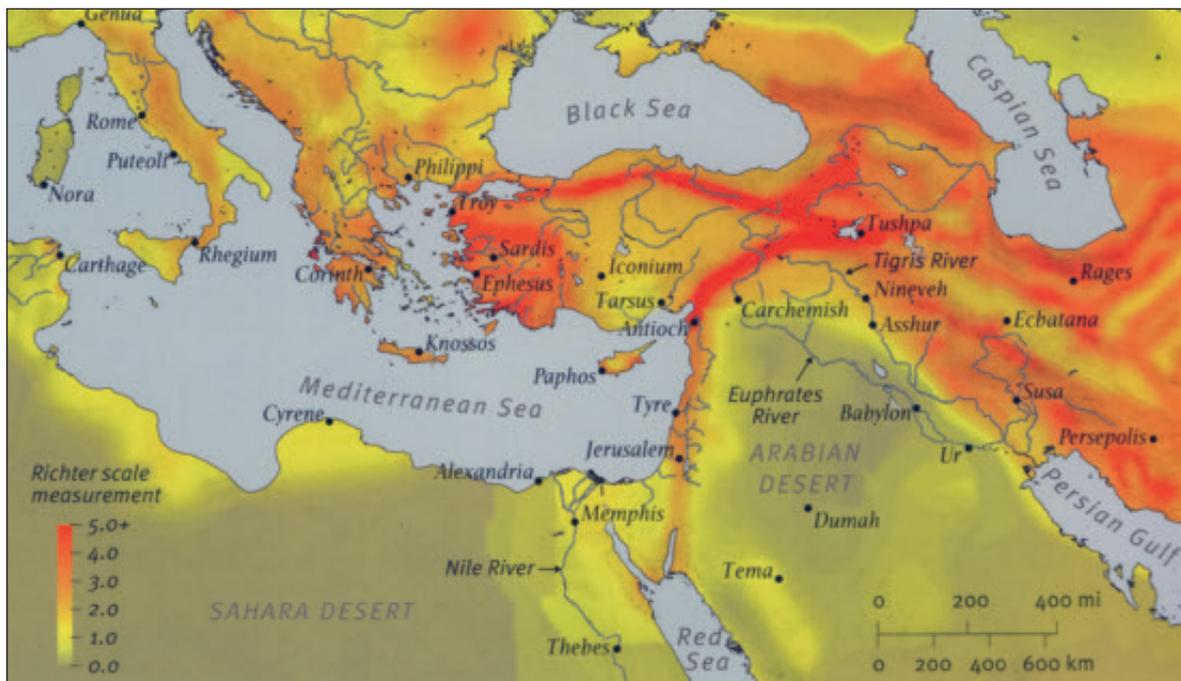


Figure 1. A map of the Ancient World showing key sites discussed in the text as well as areas of seismic activity. After Currid and Barret (2010, 38 fig. 0-8).

ing differentiates between three dimensions of the word catastrophe:

- Catastrophe as the final part of a drama (poetological structural concept);
- Catastrophe as a turning point for better or worse (concept of dramatic change);
- Catastrophe as a calming effect (concept of intentional effect).

While in modern times the poetological structural concept of catastrophe prevailed, it is clear that, in the 20th century, the concept of dramatic change was predominant, though with a significant shift in meaning from the word's origins: today, the concept has an exclusively pejorative denotation, but this was not the case in ancient Greek. The term disaster, on the other hand, took on a negative connotation from the outset. Here, the pejorative prefix *δυσ-* plus the noun *ἀστήρ* mean 'bad/evil star', hinting at ominous astrological observations (e.g. Berlejung 2012, 6). Yet, there were also 'welcome catastrophes' (Chaniotes 1998) in ancient times: those striking the enemy and those desired for the future. Catastrophes that strike the enemy can play a role in identity-building, acting as a foundation for the remembrance

culture of a people. For Israel, the rescue at the Red Sea, which was depicted in dramatic pictures, worked towards unity and identity in the same way as when the Greeks described their victory over the Persians in catastrophic images. Apocalypses that are desired for the future reveal the catastrophic future fate the existing world, ruled by ungodly earthly powers, will suffer.

The term catastrophe was already used in its pejorative sense in the Septuagint to describe the destruction ('overturn') of places such as Sodom and Gomorrah as well as the extermination of peoples or groups. However, contrary to Günther's (2009) argument, other nuances of the meaning of *καταστρέφω* can also be found in the Septuagint. Perhaps most importantly, the Septuagint includes a significant development that has hitherto been overlooked: while the concept of catastrophe is rarely used in classical ancient sources to describe events in nature, it is indeed the Septuagint that employs the verb *καταστρέφω* to describe the overturn of given natural orders, thus paving the way for the concept of natural catastrophe or natural disaster, which has been in use since the 18th century.

With this in mind, the following questions

arise: which definitions of catastrophe and disaster ‘make sense’ and which can be applied to the ancient civilisations? Enrico Quarantelli, a pioneer of the American school of disaster sociology, criticised and reflected on the variety of definitions given to the scientific notion of disaster on more than one occasion (e.g. Quarantelli 1985, 43-44; cf. Quarantelli 1998a; 1998b). Does disaster refer to the reason for a catastrophic event, its physical impact, the evaluation of its effects, its social consequences or the social construction of a catastrophic event in the society’s consciousness? Recent studies in cultural anthropology attempt to integrate these different scientific perspectives. They view catastrophe primarily as an interconnected process in the close link between nature and culture. Such a process leads to an event that destroys the essential foundations of a vulnerable community (see Hoffmann and Oliver-Smith 1999, 4). If we combine this insight with a moderate constructivist perspective, we obtain the following definition: *catastrophe is a process in the framework of the essentially interconnected link between nature and culture which leads to an event in a vulnerable community that destroys the essential foundations of this community and is perceived as a comprehensive calamity.*

Such a moderate constructivist perspective is important because, without the human being and the human view of events, there would be no catastrophe. Dramatic changes in nature can only be understood as catastrophe in its modern sense if they concern humankind. Why should Mount Vesuvius itself be afraid of an eruption? Sandstorms on Jupiter may reach an extent that would have disastrous consequences on Earth, but they cannot be called catastrophes themselves. This is why disasters never occur in nature, but only in culture; even if their origin is to be found in the interdependency between nature and culture (cf. Oliver-Smith 1999, 28). In *Man in the Holocene*, Max Frisch (1989 [1979], 165) phrases this idea as follows: ‘only human beings can recognize catastrophes, provided they survive them; Nature recognizes no catastrophes.’ Viewed as a mere change of elements in nature, a catastrophe would be

something quite normal, at most a little unusual. Volcanoes erupt from time to time, and meteorites occasionally hit earth. In contrast, disaster understood as a cultural catastrophe should include not only the latent risk potential of the given culture, but also human experience with catastrophe. Since it is in fact human beings who perceive a natural event as disaster, we must include human experience with catastrophes (cf. Meier 2007, 45) and define disaster as an ‘interpretive category’ (Angel 1996, 29). Hence a disaster is a sudden, unforeseen and seemingly contingent end of the world as it is known – an example of extreme discontinuity (cf. Cavalli 1997, 463). It occurs when human beings perceive an event – be it self-induced or not – as an ominous end to their current life-world.

Practical coping strategies for dealing with disasters

Disastrous events can have many faces, but the most significant ones in the ancient Near East pertain to drought and famine, earthquakes, flooding, wars and epidemic plagues. Alongside canal digging, one way to prepare for famines and droughts in Egypt and Mesopotamia is – especially in ancient Palestine – to dig wells and develop the agricultural storage economy by building cisterns, silos and storage jars (Weippert 1977; Müller 1977). Another method of dealing with famine and drought is to emigrate to countries where the situation is preferable and food is in adequate supply. Apart from biblical stories (Michel 2010), it is Egyptian sources in particular that relay this phenomenon and describe nomads arriving at country borders to beg for food (Staubli 1991, 19-66). In Babylonia, another way of dealing with famine was the intensification of date palms agriculture (as opposed to growing barley) and the extension of canal irrigation (Kleber 2013, 236).

When examining earthquakes, some examples from ancient Syro-Palestine have to suffice (cf. Edelman 2012). Here, the Dead Sea Rift constitutes a geological fault line where the continental plates of Africa and

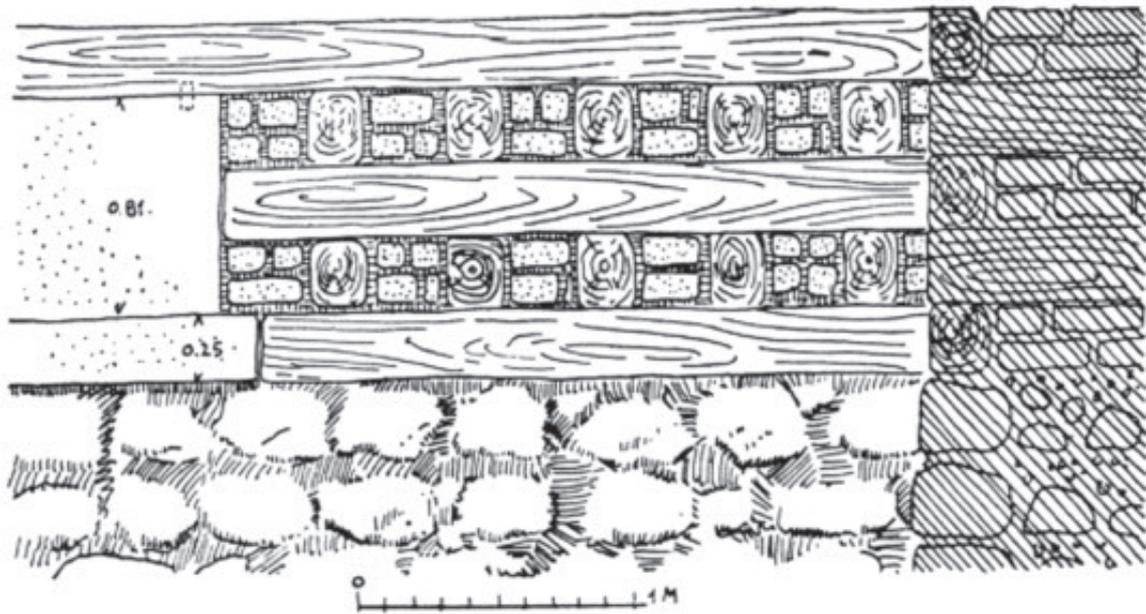


Figure 2. Vertical and horizontal beams at Zincirli. After Naumann (1955, 98 fig. 83).

Arabia form a tectonic boundary zone responsible for the occurrences of earthquakes (de Boer and Sanders 2004, 22-44; see Figure 1 above). According to Marco (2008, 148), it may be difficult, from an archaeological point of view, to ‘distinguish earthquake damage from anthropogenic damage and from other natural processes of wear and tear’. However, he also claims that ‘horizontal shifting of large building blocks, downward sliding of one or several blocks from masonry arches, collapse of heavy, stably-built walls, chipping of corners of building blocks, and aligned falling of walls and columns’ can be considered

typical signs of damage caused by earthquakes that arise out of the motions of the Jordan Rift Valley’s tectonic boundary zone (for a general discussion of the aims, methods and problems of archaeoseismology cf., e.g., Galadini et al. 2006; Sintubin 2011). In Edelman’s (2012, 225-234) point of view, it is possible to identify three architectural methods employed to protect houses against the impacts of earthquakes in ancient Syro-Palestine (for partly similar antiseismic building techniques in Classical Antiquity – cf. Stiros 1995). The first method is the incorporation of wooden beams into stone and mud-brick walls used for flexion to dampen seismic vibrations. ‘The most probable explanation is that protection against shock, and particularly earth shock, lies at the heart of this problem. [...] In such a disturbance, stone or brick walls are apt to give way, where a long timber will cushion the shock to some extent and hold the bonding together; and transverse timbers, though shorter, will tend to prevent a wall from falling outward or inward’ (Thomson 1960, 61; cf. Naumann 1955, 88-104; Figure 2). The second method is to secure mud-brick walls with wooden foundations (Mazar 1999, 21-22), and the third method is to strengthen walls by building adjoining houses with walls only a few centimetres apart (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Back-to-back walls at Tell Qasile, area A, stratum X. After Mazar (1993, 1205).



Figure 4. Dam at Petra to detain the impacts of flash floods. After Bagg (2012, 327 fig. 3).

Examples of disastrous flooding are extreme floods of the Nile in ancient Egypt and flash floods in the Wadis of the Levante. In Egypt, dams were not only built together with canals to constitute and regulate water systems, but they were also developed as a protective measure against the extreme flooding of the Nile (Quack 2012, 352-371). In Petra, a flash flood protection system was built which consisted firstly of dams with small outlets (Figure 4) and stilling basins with planted reeds to stem the flow of water and secondly of channels and tunnels to divert the water's course (Bagg 2012, 320-328).

Wars were one of the most excessive disasters in the history of the ancient Near East that involved not only great human losses but also the deliberate destruction of the enemy's ecosystem (Wright 2012; Figure 5). To prepare for the disastrous impacts of a siege, towns not only forestalled by building walls and fortresses and by keeping commodities in storerooms but also by building underground tunnel systems with access to water basins (e.g. Jerusalem's famous Siloam tunnel and pool as preparations for the siege of Jerusalem by the



Figure 5. Assyrian Destruction of the enemy's ecosystem. Following Layard (1853, fig. 73).

Assyrians). If all else failed, refugee flight was a way of avoiding capture and being at the mercy of the enemy (Burke 2012).

Plagues could occur and be transmitted by certain animals or by epidemic infection. Locust infestations were particularly frequent. In ancient Greece, various ways of preventing locust plagues were devised: the polis could ban the killing of birds (or even nourish birds) known to eat locusts. Another method was to target locusts with fire and smoke, or to exterminate the locusts' eggs (Graßl 1998, 444). Epidemic plagues were, at best, only minimally comprehended by what we would call 'natural science'. Apart from ritual and religious approaches to cope with epidemic plagues (see below), some letters from Syrian Mari tell of the relocation of settlements to other areas, especially higher grounds, in times of an epidemic (Biggs 1995, 1922).

When disasters struck, the Hellenistic and Roman kings legitimized themselves politically by establishing themselves as benefactors. They sent financial support to areas affected by disaster, granted tax relief, sent supplies and deployed manpower and expertise (Bringmann

1993; Meier 2012). Therefore, the catalogue of virtues for a good king included disaster relief in the role of saviour. An example of such a king was Mithridates Eupator Dionysos, who boasted about his donation of 100 talents for the reconstruction of the Phrygian city of Apameia, which had previously been destroyed by an earthquake (Sonnabend 1999, 200).

Contingency and meaning in ancient and modern worldviews

In order to grasp the understanding of disaster in ancient civilisations, we need to have a closer look at the concepts of contingency and meaning (cf. Dietrich 2012). The cultures of Antiquity developed worldviews that integrated disasters in a meaningful way. They had very little interest in finding a scientific explanation for the catastrophe – this was an attitude that arguably first emerged in the Greek epoch and developed further during the time of the Roman Empire. In nearly all cases, attention was focused almost exclusively on interpreting and integrating the disaster into the given worldview.

From our modern viewpoint, the disaster itself has no meaning; it is *meaning-less*. It is simply the case that events occur – caused either by nature or technology – and make a sudden and dramatic impact on humanity. Only the fortunate or unfortunate survivor can ponder the meaning of the catastrophe. During this process, it is tempting to provide meaning to what would otherwise be a disturbingly arbitrary and senseless event. However, this is nothing but the attribution of sense in a situation of senseless contingency.

Contingency is the experience of a correlation of events that occur in view of our intentions and actions in an unpredictable and ungraspable way (Lübbe 1975, 177). Meaning is but the interpretation of a contingent world and history in the pattern of subjectivity (Rüsen 1997, 18). Following a moderate constructivist perspective, the world outside the human consciousness is contingent, whereas meaning is a subjective and constructed attribution. In principle, this also applies to disas-

ter theories that include the chaotic element of coincidence in the calculation of risk. Not all disasters can be dealt with or even predicted by risk management. If a comet hit planet Earth, this would statistically be bad luck and, if the Yellowstone super-volcano finally erupted, we would probably be faced with a situation worse than all catastrophes caused by humankind (cf. Lowenstern et al. 2006; Self 2006). These are both examples of contingent disasters with no attributed meaning. In 1710, Leibniz was still able to state, ‘We live in the best of all possible worlds’, and Alexander Pope followed in 1733 with his reassuring assumption, ‘Whatever is, is right’; however, Voltaire’s insight after the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 (in *Candide*’s words) is already void of meaning: ‘If this is the best of all possible worlds, what are the others like?’. When disaster strikes, the meaningless prevails over the well-proven and well-established worldviews constructed by humanity. Catastrophe destroys the modern worldview of what is safe or is deemed to be safe. Given the contingencies of life, there is no difference in category between humans, animals and plants. Like all living creatures, human beings must either cope with contingency or perish. What else are catastrophes but absolute contingency with comprehensive misanthropic ramifications?

The perspective of the cultures and civilisations of Antiquity is entirely different. From their perspective, there is no contingency in our modern sense; pure coincidence as a concept and part of their worldview is rarely thinkable nor can it be articulated – the words *miqrāh*, *αὐτόματον* or *contingentia* have no significant meaning for the ancient worldview as a whole. Here, ‘meaning’ is not a mental construction, but a fact inherent to experience and events. To my knowledge, with the exception of Hebrew *miqrāh* in 1 Sam 6:9 (cf. Machinist 1995), neither contingency nor meaning are represented with concepts of their own in the Eastern or Western Semitic languages or in Egyptian; for, in every case, the hands of gods or demons are always involved in the ‘coincidence’. Therefore, contingency is immediately transformed into ‘meaning’ in the sense of teleological concepts such as intention, plan, or purpose; disaster

is integrated into the worldview, even if the worldview is itself changed in the process. This method of coping with contingency is made possible by considering human beings, the world and history as subjects. Despite the significant differences in the worldviews of the ancient cultures, and despite their historical shifts, there is a common fundamental structure and function: all definitions of relation are personalised. This also applies to disasters when they are explained by the intention and plan of the gods. By personalising the relation of human beings to the world, they are understood as personal relationships and thereby filled with meaning. A worldview, which is completely constructed as a web of personal relationships is meaningful and able to integrate disasters. In contrast, our modern de-personalised worldview sees only meaningless, blindly acting forces and elements at work in a catastrophe and understands catastrophe as a 'symbol for things we are not able to grasp' (Voss 2006, 10). The result is damage to our worldview that is void of meaning and difficult to repair (on the importance of resilience and resistance resources from a social science perspective cf. Lorenz 2013).

For the ancient civilisations, catastrophe as an unforeseen disaster does not usually destroy their worldview, provided that the culture itself survives; instead, it is integrated into the given worldview and, in certain circumstances, may also modify it. Israel's monotheism is a response to the Babylonian exile and develops the given image of God and the world into something new, though it does not represent a radical break with its former views. Since the ancient civilisations' cultural and religious worldview knows an 'environment' (in Luhmann's sense), disaster can also be constructed in terms of system theory. Ancient worldviews constructed an outside world, which we now commonly refer to using the Greek term 'chaos'. This chaos, which may occur in the form of disaster at any time, is neither characterised by extreme complexity nor does it demonstrate a rampant, impersonal face; instead, it is reduced in its complexity and captured in relationships, for example, as Isfet or Seth in Egyptian.

Even the concept of 'fate' ultimately represents personalised gods such as Shai, Hathor or Isis in Egypt, Namtar in Mesopotamia, Adonai in Israel, Tyche in Greece or Fortuna in Rome. And concrete effects of chaos are interpreted in an even more personal manner: Poseidon shakes the earth and causes floods, Zeus provokes thunderstorms, Apollo orders the plague, and Hephaistos (Vulcanus in ancient Italy) erupts the earth. Thus, tracing back extremely complex catastrophic events to a small number of personalised causes reduces complexity, which facilitates understanding and creates meaning. The civilisations of Antiquity did not neglect life's ambivalence, but attributed it to personal causes, integrating it into their worldviews. As ambivalence is always taken into account, these worldviews enable human beings to cope with disappointment. Since ambivalence, even with its potentially destructive and disastrous consequences, remains part of the worldview, the given culture responds to disappointment with composure and a relatively high frustration tolerance. Disaster itself is undesired, but, in principle, is it to be expected. In cultural anthropology, the modern definition of the human being – a creature which, like all others, has to cope with meaningless contingency or perish – is contrasted with the following definition of the human being: a creature which is able to culturally cope with contingency (including the contingency of disaster) through worldviews that allow space for ambivalence.

A worldview that accounts for ambivalence possesses backdoors through which coping strategies are free to enter the stage. In the following, I wish to highlight four strategies used for coping with disasters (cf. Dietrich 2012), namely aestheticising, moralising, pedagogising and the creation of performance. These strategies are mainly conducted via three media: narrative, art and ritual.

Aestheticising disasters

We can gain an essential and fundamental insight into the understanding of disaster from the perspective of the ancient civilisa-



Figure 6. © Gerrit Preuß, *Shipwreck with Spectator* (2010).

tions if we compare the concept of disaster to the concept of miracle. Unlike the modern understanding of miracle, which takes a miracle to be a breach of the laws of nature, the ancients did not consider miracles as events that contradict natural laws. According to the views of ancient Israel, miracles are actions and signs of God that are amazing and frightening (e.g. Schwienhorst-Schönberger 2001). Amazing things (נפלאות) are also frightening things (נוראות). Fright belongs to the phenomenon of disaster in the same way it belongs to miracles. Amazing and frightening things could take the form of a wondrous rescue for one group, yet, at the same time, they could have disastrous consequences for another; an example being the rescue at the Sea of Reeds. Insofar as disasters in Antiquity are mainly due to the actions of gods, disaster and miracle have a lot in common. For this reason, the following can be said about the worldview of ancient cultures: disaster is a contingency that – just like miracles – occurs suddenly, is faced with fear and trembling, and can be traced back to supernatural personal causes.

Ever since the Romantic period, we have been aware that there is such a thing as aesthetics of evil, aesthetics of fright and, thus,

also aesthetics of disaster (e.g. Bohrer 1978), although the victims of disaster may justifiably dislike the idea. Of course, the description and narration of disaster cannot be performed by those who perished, and it is rarely performed by the fortunate or unfortunate survivors. The sources seldom tell of those who completely lose their faith, worldview or culture as a result of the disaster. It is usually those who were unaffected or only indirectly affected who aesthetically exalt disaster from a distance. Since Lucretius, Antiquity has known the concept of ‘shipwreck with spectator’ (Figure 6).

Lucretius mainly compares the relation between shipwreck and spectator to the relation between the philosopher and reality (cf. Blumenberg 1997), but it can also be applied to the ancient narrations of disaster: the spectator, author and reader ‘watches’ the disaster from safe ground and elevates it to something exalted. The narration, also the narration of terrible things, creates space for the integration of disaster into a context that makes it possible to speak the otherwise unspeakable and to include what would usually be excluded from a temporal sequence of narrated events. This is why there is no ‘catastrophic crisis’ in the sense of Rösen (2001, 152-179),



Figure 7. *Starving people at the Pyramid of Unas. After Drioton (1943, fig. 3,49).*

which completely escapes historical concepts of meaning. Instead, we discover that the ‘ability to produce cohesion’ (Straub 1998, 110) is a necessary condition for any narration, including the narration of disaster. Even stammering and traumatised narration (concerning the ancient Near East see Dietrich 2014) allows the ruptures of being and becoming to appear in a narrated cohesion with a beginning and an end, thus transforming ‘the irrational contingency into a regulated, meaningful, intelligible contingency’ (Ricoeur 1986, 14). When the battle of the Olympic gods causes natural disasters, when the floodgates of heaven open up to drown the entire earth, when poetic laments are written about the demise of Sumerian cities and Jerusalem, when Jeremiah 4:23-28 describes the revocation of creation in a language just as beautiful as the story of creation itself, we are presented with written attempts to aestheticise terrible events that are integrated and assimilated into the collective memory of those watching from a distance. Even those immediately affected by the catastrophe usually describe events from a safe distance: words of salvation and damnation by Deutero-Isaiah and Ezekiel are not written during their flight, but in the safe haven of

Babylon. In a number of cases, disasters are also integrated into pleasant stories for aetiological purposes. The myth of the Heavenly Cow uses disasters to explain the separation of heaven and earth, gods and human beings, and the legend of the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah attempts to explain the presence of the Dead Sea Salt Crystals.

Aestheticism of disaster is not only found in literary form, but also in iconography. The ‘narration’ of the picture provides the dreadful with aesthetics and meaning beyond disaster. The ancient Egyptian depiction of the starving people at the causeway of the Pyramid of Unas is a good example of using art to cope with contingency (Figure 7; for a similar scene at the causeway of the Pyramid of Sahure cf. Hawass and Verner 1996). The terror of starvation is depicted in a realistic and detailed way, but it is relieved of its arbitrariness through its integration into the reign of Unas. Firstly, underneath the scene, there are the names of the king’s scribes who took care of the weak, hungry and emaciated foreign population. Secondly, the starving people are placed next to positive scenes praising the reign of Unas: agricultural, hunting, battle or transport scenes. The depiction of disaster and its integration

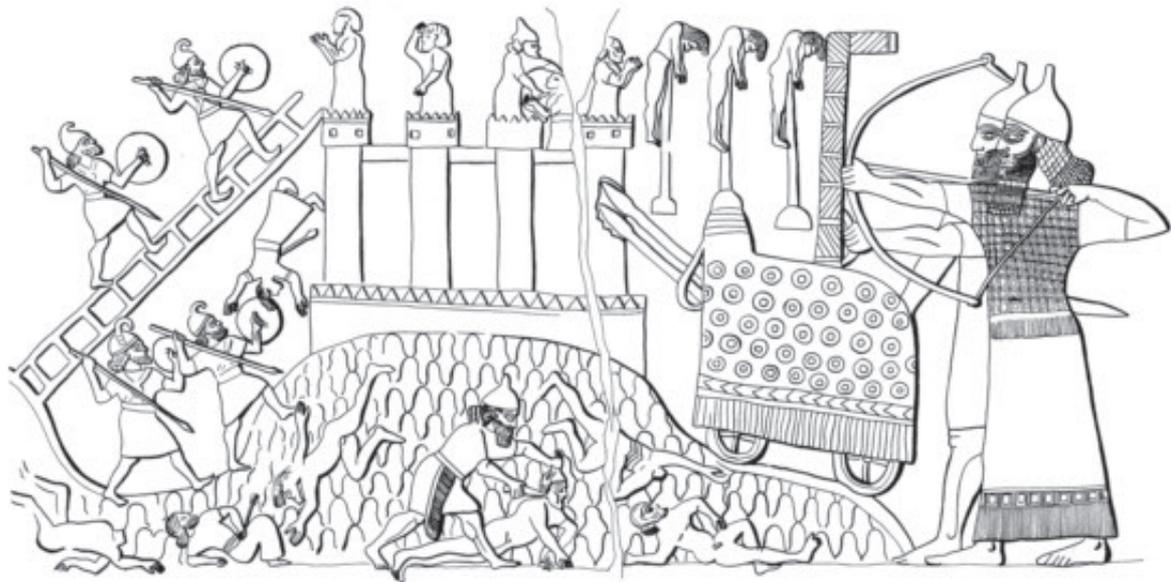


Figure 8. Relief of Tiglat-Pileser III depicting Assyrian war. After Keel (1996, fig. 132).

into a superior order removes its isolated and arbitrary contingency. Tellingly, the name of Unas's pyramid was 'Beautiful are the sites of Unas' (*Nfr-swt-Wnjs*).

Politicising and moralising disaster

In recent sociological disaster theory, the concepts of risk and danger are widely used. In sociological disaster theory in particular, quantitative models for 'risk management' in view of looming catastrophes are being developed, and sociological disaster theory likes to assume the role of alarming society (Luhmann 1991, 13). The concepts of risk and danger have also spread to cultural-anthropological disaster theory. In their book *Risk and Culture*, Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky (1982) demonstrate how the moral and political perspectives as well as social institutions of each culture select and collectively construct natural and technological risks in the first place: risks are not just computable facts, but 'a way of thinking, and a highly artificial contrivance at that' (Douglas 1992, 46), which corresponds to social institutions and cultural mentalities. According to Douglas and Wildavsky (1982, 8), in the so-called primitive cultures, natural disasters are explained by moral wrongdoing. What

we understand as 'nature' is in fact part of every form of relation of which a culture in Antiquity consists, which means that every disaster displays culpable behaviour. This way, the moral, political and social foundations of the given culture usually remain unchallenged by dangers and disasters; on the contrary, they are legitimised: the attribution of responsibility and culpability for disasters is part of the legitimisation strategy of specific life forms and values.

For this reason, disasters cannot only be aestheticised in literature and iconography, but they can also be used for politicisation and moralisation in ancient civilisations. The intention of the Neo-Assyrian depiction of war catastrophes was political legitimisation; by showing the Assyrian's victory over their enemies in connection with the atrocities of war, the Assyrians warned every potential rebel that his insurrection would end in disaster (Figure 8).

The relief of Tiglath-Pileser III from Nimrud shows the enemy's catastrophe in a paradigmatic way, depicting him as a defeated, abased and feminised (i.e. lamenting and pathetic) enemy (Berlejung 2009, 234-235). His own actions are legitimised, and potential rebels are shown the risks associated with insurrection. The concept of 'how to do things with disaster icons' from Neo-Assyrian times serves the purpose of dramatisation for propaganda pur-

poses. Similarly, the prevalent understanding of disaster as divine punishment can hardly conceal its moral and religious impetus in the narrations on the catastrophes of Akkad or Jerusalem. Ancient Near Eastern and biblical vassal treaties threaten disasters of various kinds in the form of curses in case of a contract breach (e.g. Steymans 1995). The menace of disaster is used as a means of political theology in order to guarantee respect of the treaty. In ancient Egyptian culture, the so-called intermediate periods served as a contrast used for the projection of the *topoi* of a world turned upside-down with a variety of disastrous conditions (cf. Kruger 2012) in order to elevate and legitimise the society's own fundamental social values; the 'guidelines of the country', as they are called in the ancient Egyptian Admonitions (*sšm.w n ꜥ*, Adm. 15,1). In the prophetic speeches of the Bible, as well as in the political speeches of ancient Greece, dramatising rhetoric of crisis (Goetze and Strobel 2011) is used to hold the community together in the face of undermining social developments.

The performative power of crisis and disaster rituals

The most commonly witnessed form of response to disaster in the ancient Near East is not a practical one (as in our modern sense of the word as effective and functional), but consisted in the performance of rituals, either as crisis or disaster ritual. Cultic emergencies as a result of pillaging or destruction of temples and theft of idols are solved with rituals of lamentation and grieving, as well as restoration and re-dedication of the temple, the return of the stolen idols or the use of substitute idols or symbols (cf. Berlejung 2002). Some historical sources even confirm the assumption put forward by cultural anthropologists that disaster can have positive effects on unity and identity, promoting a collective group identity. For example, ancient Israel responds to the disaster of exile with identity markers such as monotheism, circumcision, and the Sabbath, and sets itself apart from outsiders by prohibiting mixed marriages. Faced with the destruc-

tion of Jerusalem, the concept of collective and cross-generational guilt facilitates an identity building that is able to explain and cope with the experienced disaster. Collective memory of the catastrophe is ritually guaranteed through a remembrance day in order to commemorate the destruction of the temple, thus creating identity in common remembrance.

Modern sociological and cultural disaster theories reject the concept of natural disasters. Instead, they identify potential risks and dangers inherent to society, changing the concept from natural to cultural disasters ('Without people there is no disaster'; O'Keefe et al. 1976, 566). Vulnerability or, in recent research, the lack of resilience capacities (cf. Lorenz 2013), may then be regarded 'as the real cause of disaster' (O'Keefe et al. 1976, 567). Therefore, some theorists propose solutions to mitigate these inherent risks. A similar reaction is recognisable from the ancient Near Eastern experts for omens and rituals: they do not view the looming catastrophe as a purely natural phenomenon, but as a cultural phenomenon based on the interdependency of nature and culture. As a first step, these omen experts identify potential disasters from nature or the gods. As a second step, they indicate the cultural causes of the disaster: it is human misbehaviour that leads to natural disasters. Moreover, if the catastrophe has already occurred, rituals are required to determine the cultural causes of catastrophe. Finally, in a third step, the ritual experts perform rituals to prevent the disaster or to eliminate its cause and effects.

Rituals are part of the efforts to cope with contingency and disaster (Lübbe 1975, 177). It is mainly in the world of rituals that disaster is integrated. But what use are rituals in situations of disaster? In his essay *Das Zeug zur Macht*, Peter Sloterdijk (2007, 145-6) speaks of skilful non-competence, stating that everything outside the power of humanity can be survived 'in the shelter of rituals more or less routinely'. If the individual is powerless and frightened in their first encounter with disaster, social crisis rituals enable them to channel their fear into a gain in ritual competence.

In the ancient Near East, this gain in ritual competence is usually achieved in three

steps: firstly through gained insight, secondly through an increase in options for action, and thirdly through the performative enactment of a new state. The first step centres on acquiring insight, since, without insight, there can be no crisis or disaster ritual carried out in the ancient Near East; experts of rituals ask the gods or interpret signs (e.g. Maul 2003-2005). Through this process, the cause of disaster becomes known, which, in most cases, is twofold: (firstly) the wrath of the gods that results from (secondly) human misbehaviour pertaining to moral or religious affairs. This new insight into the framework of a 'punitarian interpretation' regarding the supernatural cause (divine wrath) makes it possible to see the face of a god or demon in the given disaster. In this case, the newly acquired competence is the possibility of entering into a ritual relationship (relational gain) with the personal cause of disaster – gods or demons – be it in a 'negative' form (as ritual defence) or in a 'positive' form (as ritual sacrifice and confession of sin).

The newly acquired insight into the framework of a moral interpretation regarding the natural cause (human misbehaviour), which originally induced the supernatural cause, enables options for action through ritual measures, allowing the affected society to become active in atoning for past action and changing its current behaviour. In this regard, it is essential to determine the exact form and quality of the human misbehaviour. To refer to an example: during the three years of famine mentioned in 2 Sam 21, David gives order to enquire of the Lord as to the cause of the famine, which turns out to be an un-atoned blood guilt incurred by Saul's slaughter of the Gibeonites. It is only with this insight that a ritual for atonement can be performed, thus ending the famine. In other cases, gods such as Ares or Jarri, Erra and Nergal, Resheph, Sekhmet or Seth and demons such as Namtar or the Utukku and Sebettu demons may appear without reason and bring misery upon the people. Corresponding rituals serve the purpose of defence and elimination, not atonement. In another case, fertility gods, who are essential for the wellbeing of the people and the land, may disappear and take the land's

fertility with them, as in the case of the Hittite god Telipinu. Rituals of evocation are then used to recall the lost god.

As we can see, the forms of ritual used in response to disaster can be diverse (see Huber 2005 for an overview). We can differentiate between typically apotropaic rituals, mourning and fasting rituals, elimination and substitution rituals, atonement rituals and evocation rituals for protection against and coping with collective disaster. Quite often, several types were used simultaneously. The knowledge of who (which gods or demons) and which behaviour is responsible for disaster is complemented by the wealth of experience of priests and scribes, who know how to respond to the causes of disaster – not to the way disaster works. Thus, ritual experts do not aim at symptoms, but at the root causes.

For all of these rituals, we can claim that, in a liminal state of collective threat, the principle of visualisation helps to locate options for action. This also applies in a situation of collective danger, crisis and catastrophe. This becomes especially clear in the case of elimination ritual: disaster, which usually occurs only in its material effects, itself becomes visible in material form, which opens up the possibility of ritual treatment in the form of elimination ritual. The concretisation of calamity caused by the catastrophe means that the calamity is given physical shape in the form of *miasma*, which can be publically removed. The concrete, tangible calamity is transferred to an object, animal or person in a ritual miasmatic procedure, who or which now eliminates the problem as its carrier or substitute. The principle of visualisation also applies to apotropaic rituals (for example, when door posts are stained with blood to chase away the desert demon), to collective atonement (when there is a public ritual substitution or killing), and to evocation rituals (when paths are prepared with delicious food or drink offerings in order to persuade the vanished god to return).

None of these rituals are examples of 'primitive patterns of behaviour' (Huber 2005, 237), but rather show a liminal state of activity and competence in the face of threats that can only be met with ritual performance. It is this per-

formance by action and speech that demonstrates the new, cleansed and evil-free state of the country or individual; for example, when in a *namburbi* the sun god Shamash's verdict is declared in favour of the ritual performer, who symbolically demonstrates his new state of being with purified white clothing, or when evil is captured in a bronze cauldron and buried. In these proceedings, it is not of the utmost importance whether the ritual is able to immediately stop the disaster. Instead, focus is placed on finding a way to cope with the disaster through the performance of a ritual that helps to counteract the state of shock and abolish not the symptoms, but the causes of disaster.

In the ancient civilisations, the participants in the ritual did not, in the sense of Victor Turner (2005), enter a liminal ritual community ('*communitas*') that temporarily suspended social rules and hierarchies, making all participants equal for the time of the ritual – on the contrary. Disaster rituals were developed along the lines of existing social hierarchies. Those concerned did not perform the rituals themselves, but had to consult ritual experts such as the *ašipū* in Mesopotamia. If a catastrophe strikes the country and community significantly, the king may be the cause of it, and he is under an obligation to counteract it. This king-centred interpretation scheme goes back to the concept of the king as mediator between gods and human beings. On this understanding, the death of a king may be the cause of drought and famine, as described in the famous Aqat Epic and in a Neo-Assyrian burial ritual (cf. Kwasman 2009). If in Anatolia or Mesopotamia negative omens predict the death of a king to be a catastrophe for the whole country, this threat is counteracted with rituals to substitute the king (cf. Kümmerl 1967). In these rituals, social hierarchies are not abolished, but inverted: for some time, the king is sent into exile or plays the role of a servant, while a prisoner of war or a socially low-ranking individual temporarily rules as king and assumes the responsibility: he may be killed (like in Assyria) or led across the country's borders (like in Asia Minor). Finally, the behaviour of the king himself may be the rea-

son for disaster, as shown in 2 Sam 21 with Saul, in the case of Kirta in the Kirta Epic, the example of Suppiluliuma in the Hittite plague prayers, or in the fall of king Oedipus. In these cases, the king must ritually seek atonement for himself and his country.

Ancient disaster science and its pedagogical impetus

Interpretations of omens and performance of rituals are part of so-called portent science. According to our modern understanding, this knowledge of portents is pre-scientific, but this is not the case in the ancient civilisations' own understanding. However, it can be challenged by a way of thinking that, even by our standards, could be viewed as a first step towards modern science. One example is Plato's *kataklysmos* theory of periodically occurring disasters (cf. Bien 1976). In opposition to our modern view, however, the reasonable, scientific interpretation of disaster in Antiquity includes a pedagogical impetus: scientific insight is considered as therapy that removes fear (Sonnabend 1999, 174-180). The most renowned representative of a both scientific and pedagogical disaster theory in ancient times is Seneca in his work on earthquakes (*De terrae motu*): the fact that people do not understand the complete course of events of a disaster only makes it worse. If you know the reason behind it, you take the largest and most painful sting out of it (*De terrae motu* 3). Furthermore, the stoic states that any life on earth will only end in death. If dying and death are the same for everybody, it is irrelevant whether the individual is slain by a mountain or a small stone. For this reason, Seneca argues that it is better to die heroically in a disaster than by ordinary causes (*De terrae motu* 2, 7-9). Here, the pedagogical impetus of removing our fear of disasters is evident.

In sum, this perspective might appear problematic when envisioning a death in a good old age and after a life full of years. Yet, more readily appreciated in our own eyes may be the fact, outlined above, that the ancient cultures integrated disasters in a worldview by

construing them as a web of ambivalent but meaningful and personal relationships. They thereby provided ‘soft’ resilience capacities, which our disenchanting modern world quite often is missing. We cannot perhaps turn back to such an approach, but we can become more sensitive to developing our own ‘soft’ cultural and social resilience capacities.

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