

### Historical disaster research: state of research, concepts, methods and case studies

Schenk, Gerrit Jasper

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Special Issue:

»Historical Disaster Research«

»Historische Katastrophenforschung«

Editorial



## Historical Disaster Research. State of Research, Concepts, Methods and Case Studies

Gerrit Jasper Schenk\*

**Abstract:** »Historische Katastrophenforschung. Forschungsstand, Begriffe, Konzepte und Fallbeispiele«. Disasters have always accompanied human history. Historical research on disasters is, however, a recent trend. After a short review of the engagement with disasters in Europe since antiquity, an outline is given of research approaches, concepts, methods and theories from social sciences and cultural studies, along with recent historical research of primarily natural disasters. The present volume presents the research approach and papers of the DFG's network of young academics "Historical disaster research with a view to comparative cultural study" (*Historische Erforschung von Katastrophen in kulturvergleichender Perspektive*), situating them in the history of this field of investigation. It deals with the findings, opportunities and future lines of research into historical disasters with a view to developing a cross-disciplinary and comparative cultural approach.

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\* Address all communications to: Gerrit Jasper Schenk, Historisches Institut der Universität Stuttgart, Abteilung Mittlere Geschichte, Heilbronner Straße 7, 70174 Stuttgart, Germany; e-mail: gerrit.schenk@po.hi.uni-stuttgart.de.

The present volume is the result of cooperation within the network "Historical disaster research with a view to comparative cultural study" (*Historische Erforschung von Katastrophen in kulturvergleichender Perspektive*) of the German Research Foundation and its guests. This cooperation will be explained in more detail below. Many thanks go to all concerned, both individuals and institutions. I am particularly grateful to Franz Mauelshagen, with whom I developed the network, and Jens Ivo Engels, who took on part of the editing. Warm thanks also to Wilhelm Heinz Schröder for enabling quick publication and to the HSR staff (Okka Djuren, Cornelia Baddack) for the printing, Karin Hay and Christina Zimmermann for their untiring copy-editing, and Elaine Griffiths for translating this introduction.

## On the history of research into (natural) disasters, mainly in Europe

The historical study of disasters is in fashion. As late as in 1981 Arno Borst stated in his pioneering study on the Carynthian earthquake of 1348, which appeared in the *Historische Zeitschrift*, that historical disaster research was extremely neglected. He claimed that although recurring disasters were currently only repressed they were an integral part of the fund of social experience and thus belonged to history, even though this insight met with deep-seated resistance from modern European self-esteem (BORST 1981, p. 532). Since then, however, international research in this field has progressively become extremely intense, differentiated and specialised. Yet Borst's complaint was well justified in terms of the specifically historical research of, above all, 'natural' disasters.

The intellectual interest in natural disasters goes back long before the 20th century, which in this respect was slightly affected with amnesia. Owing to their economic and political consequences, natural disasters have always compelled people to act, mobilised the 'administration' and 'general public', incited scholarly statements, stirred up communication about their religious interpretation<sup>1</sup> and thus found their place in written and pictorial documentation. Yet these groups evidently had other motives for engaging with natural disasters than specifically historical ones.

A kind of scientific concern for these phenomena developed in Europe early on. This happened, for example, as people had recourse to the ancient study of nature by e.g. Aristotle, Plinius and Seneca (GUIDOBONI 1998) and in grappling with biblical and Christian ideas (salvation history: the creation story, flood, apocalypse) in medieval tracts on the connection between heavenly phenomena (like comets) with earthquakes and epidemics.<sup>2</sup> In addition, hand-written reports were disseminated on natural disasters and the prodigies they heralded (births of monsters, raining blood etc.). These tracts circulated Europe-wide from the 15th century in the new print medium and were gathered up in prodigy collections.<sup>3</sup> The religious and scientific interest in natural disasters apparently blossomed during the Renaissance and Reformation, with the compilation of veritable catalogues of such historical events – this continued

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<sup>1</sup> CHANIOTIS 1998; HANSKA 2002; BEHRINGER 1999; JAKUBOWSKI-TIESEN/LEHMANN 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Matteo dell'Aquila, *Tractatus de cometa atque terraemotu*, ed. FIGLIUOLO 1990; expert opinion on comets 1456/57, ed. LHOTSKY/FERRARI D'OCCHIEPPO 1960. Astrometeorology: JENKS 1983, DRAELANTS 1996. Religion: KURSAWA 1976, p. 284ff., ANGEL 1996; JAKUBOWSKI-TIESEN 2003. Distinguishing between religious and scientific explanations is a modern phenomenon.

<sup>3</sup> NICCOLI 1987, p. 47-215, MAUELSHAGEN 2001, DASTON/PARK 2002, p. 188-252.

until the early 20th century. However, until recently they were riddled with serious mistakes, gaps and inaccuracies in 25-90% of all data given.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from religious reasons, disasters arouse the interest of researchers to this day, feeding the passion for historic events from antiquity – even sensationalism – and gaining attention from an economic and political standpoint, e.g. flooding and droughts in connection with attempts to improve conditions in agriculture, or earthquakes in conjunction with risk assessment.<sup>5</sup> Precisely the need to assess risk when, for example, building nuclear power plants or facilities for the chemical industry has in many countries contributed to research into historical earthquakes and to the establishment of earthquake databases.<sup>6</sup> This particularly applies to countries in which certain natural hazards play a part, due to geophysical or physical geographic conditions, e.g. earthquakes and volcanism in Italy (BOSCHI 2000). This researching of natural disasters, driven by religious, material and also scientific interest, continues to be of historical interest as well.

### Research approaches: Concepts, definitions, constellations, processes, systems, symbolic forms and hybrids

So far no one has written a comprehensive history of the engagement with disasters from an explicitly historical angle. Such a history could and should also be a contribution to the history of the words and concepts of ‘catastrophe/disaster’. After all, despite the natural way in which disaster research was mentioned above, we cannot with a clear scholarly conscience agree that it should cover such differing phenomena as earthquakes, storm floods, inundations, city fires, plagues of locusts, famines, wars, accidents at nuclear power plants and epidemics. We would first find out what could make these disparate phenomena into a uniform research object that can be analysed in a specific way. A study of the history of the word, concept and research field of ‘catastrophe/disaster’ could further help us to trace the historical changeability and dynamics of the ideas relating to events that we today generally label ‘disasters’.

Such a study will not just promote critical reflection about the everyday understanding of the event in each case. As a hermeneutic process, it is already part of the academic analysis. Methodologically, it constitutes the first, necessary step towards the identification and differentiation of the named phenom-

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<sup>4</sup> FIGLIUOLO 1988 vol. 2, p. 228-242; MASSARD-GUILBAUD 2002, p. 11 no. 8. Error rates: ALEXANDRE 1990, p. 6, ALEXANDRE 1987, p. 18. Method: ALEXANDRE 1984. Case study: ALEXANDRE 1996.

<sup>5</sup> On one example of water regulation in Italy: TARGIONI-TOZZETTI 1767; RACCOLTA 1821-1826; BARSANTI/ROMBAI 1986, MARROCCHI 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Switzerland: <<http://histserver.ethz.ch/>>; France: <<http://www.sisfrance.net>>; Germany: <[http://www.bgr.bund.de/cln\\_006/nn\\_331868/DE/Themen/Seismologie/Erdbeben/historisch/germany.html](http://www.bgr.bund.de/cln_006/nn_331868/DE/Themen/Seismologie/Erdbeben/historisch/germany.html)> (all 4.09.07).

ena. This applies when one is convinced that underlying (or preceding) the terms is the reality they designate (whatever it may be) and likewise when one assumes the conceptual construction of that reality.<sup>7</sup> A history of the concept (*Begriffsgeschichte*)<sup>8</sup> is thus indispensable for the formation of scientific or scholarly ideas and theories about the researching of the phenomena described. This particularly applies to the fields of history, philology and philosophy, that are concerned to analyse the connection between ‘before’ and ‘after’, the understanding of the genesis of historical events, processes, problems, approaches, concepts and structures.

The modern understanding of the German term *Katastrophe* is a great calamity, an event occurring abruptly with serious consequences like the harming or loss of life for humans and animals, material damage and large-scale destruction.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, this understanding covers events connected with geophysical, meteorological or biological natural hazards like earthquakes, volcanic outbreaks, flooding, storms, fires, epidemics and famines. On the other hand, it also denotes events resulting from technical and socio-political threats like power plant accidents, wars and acts of terror. In the English-speaking world all of these phenomena are generally called *disasters*. This word has an equivalent in German (*Desaster*, *Unstern*, meaning ‘under the wrong star’) and in the Romance languages (French *désastre*, Italian *disastro*, Spanish *desastre*). It points to the astrological prehistory of the concept of disaster since it was already common in the ancient world to believe that certain constellations of stars are responsible for fateful ‘turns of events’ in human life (in astronomy: *revolution*; in theory of drama: *Katastrophe*). This (very incomplete) history of the words and concepts throws a significant light on the way natural history goes hand in hand with cultural history, as has been generally shown by recent cultural studies.<sup>10</sup>

Natural risks and natural disasters were an important topic for geographers before the Second World War.<sup>11</sup> Thereafter the issue was also taken up by different social sciences, under the headings of natural risk research, risk control and disaster management.<sup>12</sup> Besides sociologists, cultural anthropologists have in the last few decades also taken up questions about the cultural specific patterns of perceiving the environment, dealing with nature and disasters

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<sup>7</sup> On this problem see VOSS 2006, p. 16-27.

<sup>8</sup> Fundamental: KOELLECK 2006. Overview of theory and recent trends in the history of concepts in KNOBLOCH 1992 and MÜLLER 2005.

<sup>9</sup> History of words and concepts, attempts to make historical descriptions and find definitions: BERLIOZ/ QUENET 2000, p. 24-28; NOWOSADTKO/ PRÖWE 2001, p. 212f.; MASSARD-GUILBAUD 2002, p. 12f.; GROH/ KEMPE/ MAUELSHAGEN 2003b, p. 15-19.

<sup>10</sup> LEPENIES 1978, p. 118ff.; GROH/ GROH 1991, 1996; DANIEL 2002, p. 443-466; LANDWEHR/ STOCKHORST 2004, p. 98-122.

<sup>11</sup> GEIPEL 1992, p. 3, 11-20; HEWITT 1997, p. 3f.; WEICHSELGARTNER 2002, p. 58-66.

<sup>12</sup> JÄGER 1977; PETAK/ ATKISSON 1982; DOMBROWSKY 1989.

against the background of local knowledge and risk perception.<sup>13</sup> Finally, archaeologists have also concerned themselves with individual disasters and types of disaster.<sup>14</sup> Research interests also changed, presumably *inter alia* as a consequence of this development. There has been a turning away from more positivist issues like the number of victims, amount of damages, risk probability or the geological, climatic and biological causes of disasters to more constructivist issues like the perception and interpretation of dangers, risks and disasters, cultural dealings with them and their long-term effects. Natural disasters are thereby no longer just understood as a purely physical or biological event, but also as a sociocultural construct.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, it is only the respective social, political, economic and cultural constellations that make extreme natural events into historically unique disasters related to a particular society.

Further, certain causal connections between disasters or the coinciding of individual disaster types were examined in a certain sociocultural context: a storm sparks a city conflagration, flooding is followed by poor harvests and famines, that in turn favour uprisings or wars (JANKRIFT 2003, p. 125). Here, as with destruction caused by industry, war or coups d'état and more creeping disasters like epidemics, famine and climate change, there is an unmistakable interconnection between social and natural factors. These phenomena, too, may be studied from the specific angles of disaster research or, as appropriate, as preconditions for natural disasters, and even as their consequences (KÖRNER 1999a, 2000a, 2000c). The same thing applies to 'technological' disasters from the sinking of the Titanic to the accident at the nuclear power plant on Three Mile Island (USA). As 'human-made disasters' these are frequently compared to 'natural disasters' and prototypically are of interest to technological sociology.<sup>16</sup>

In looking back on the genesis of disasters, historians often distinguish between events with a natural core and those resulting from human action (SCHOTT 2003a, p. 6f.). Accordingly, natural disasters differ from societal disasters due to something that individuals and society may experience and describe as irreducible, and the expression of natural forces – but this need not be so. Regarded as an extreme case, disasters could also go unnoticed or remain undescribed, as Egon FLAIG suggests in this volume. Historians could at best try to re-construct such a catastrophe, for example, through geological traces of a meteorite or archaeological finds like skeletons and ruins.

Perhaps we can link this argument with the system theory of sociologist Niklas LUHMANN (2004, pp. 36-50) on the ecological threat to modern soci-

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<sup>13</sup> CLAUSEN/ DOMBROWSKY 1983; LUHMANN 1991; BECK 2003; DOUGLAS 1992; OLIVER-SMITH 1999; HOFFMANN/ OLIVER-SMITH 2002.

<sup>14</sup> HELLY/ POLLINO 1984; BAWDEN/ REYCRAFT 2000.

<sup>15</sup> QUARANTELLI 1998; MASSARD-GUILBAUD 2002, p. 10; OLIVER-SMITH 2002, p. 24; WEICHSELGARTNER 2002.

<sup>16</sup> EVAN/ MANION 2002; see below note 31.



ety. He thinks that if there is a lack of *Resonanz*, evolution can lead to a ‘system’ becoming a threat to itself within an ‘environment’. In critical recourse to Ernst Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms, Martin VOSS (2006) thus recently outlined a possible sociology of disaster. In it, he proposed a complement to the purely scientific, objectivist access to the things of the world, which – like a purely relativist, subjectivist understanding of the environment – merely increases the probability of disaster. Symbolic forms, with the help of which pre-modern human beings stabilised themselves in an environment with which they were in dynamic interaction, have been excluded from our life world and need to be reintegrated into its structures.<sup>17</sup> The hitherto most radical approach is taken by Bruno Latour with his ‘symmetrical anthropology’, in which every dichotomous, relational or constructivist distinction of system (society, culture) and environment (nature) is abandoned.<sup>18</sup> According to it, non-human actors (animals, artefacts: actants) have agency. Together with humans, they can form hybrids and networks, which cause the borders between the social and the material to disappear. The irreducibly natural element of natural disasters can, with Latour, be better understood in its active role, and disasters perhaps identified as hybrid events. The point is to explore to what extent these approaches and theories about historical disaster research can be productive.

Pursuing a holistic approach, recent research into the subjects most involved in disaster research has found that the vulnerability and resilience of cultures and societies to disasters are the result of complex, historically induced and processual correlations in the interface between nature and culture.<sup>19</sup> This “multidimensionality of disaster” (OLIVER-SMITH 2002, p. 25f.) focuses on ways of dealing with hazards and disasters as agents of cultural change, precisely in view of experiences or expectations of recurrence. Here certain sociocultural factors appear to play a role that differs in time and space, and indeed is unique in its own culture and society. Since dealing with disasters is possibly a constitutive, but certainly a formative element of cultures, extrapolating the experience of the past as expectation of the future, it deserves the special attention of the historical disciplines – so much may be safely asserted.

### Historical disaster research: humans, nature and ‘disaster’

In post-World War II France, scholars developed an interest in disasters centring specifically on history. This could also have come from the traditionally French link between the humanities and geography, anthropology and sociology, and their particular fondness for questions about change and stability in

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<sup>17</sup> Likewise the Vienna School of Social Ecology: FISCHER-KOWALSKI/ WEISZ 1998.

<sup>18</sup> LATOUR 1998; LATOUR 2001.

<sup>19</sup> HEWITT 1997, p. 141-168, OLIVER-SMITH 2002, p. 43-45, GARCÍA-ACOSTA 2002, p. 60-62.

the tradition of Fernand Braudel (*longue durée*).<sup>20</sup> After early studies on single issues, the history of climate by Braudel's student Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie ushered in a broader interest in the historical dimensions of climatic and meteorological events.<sup>21</sup> Recent historical disaster research has to this day been stimulated by the continued tradition of this climate and weather research.<sup>22</sup> The studies of historical mentalities on the topic of fear and safety (*risque*) in the West also dealt with the issue of disasters (DELUMEAU/ LEQUIN 1987; DELUMEAU 1989). This special interest in the concept of 'risk' and 'natural hazard' (WALTER/ FANTINI/ DELVAUX 2006) is striking in comparison to the German-language research on 'disasters'. This could be partly due to a differing sociological theory formation against the background of diverging social attitudes towards technical developments, which Florence RUDOLPH discusses here. Apart from earthquake research, stimulating questions arose from examining environmental issues, urban history and preaching.<sup>23</sup> We can say that historical disaster research, in the true sense, has been established since the 1990s, particularly focusing around the University of Grenoble.<sup>24</sup> The representatives of this research area propagate a comprehensive cultural studies analysis of disasters as their assignment and goal, in the programmatic words of Jacques BERLIOZ and Grégory QUENET (2000, p. 19): "Une histoire 'totale' des catastrophes, prenant en compte leurs composants (géographique, sociale, économique, culturelle), est possible et nécessaire."

The historical study of disasters in German-speaking countries can only be briefly outlined.<sup>25</sup> Apart from the earthquake lists made here, too, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there are individual studies in local history and, from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, famines and epidemics frequently caused by climate and weather events are discussed in the context of economic, agricultural and weather-history issues.<sup>26</sup> But research only intensified in the 1980s and perhaps also under the influence of a reception of the French-style 'historical anthropology'.

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<sup>20</sup> Peter BURKE (1991): *Offene Geschichte. Die Schule der „Annales“*, Berlin, p. 11-68. Research history: BRIFFAUD 1993, BERLIOZ/ QUENET 2000.

<sup>21</sup> SCHOTT 2003b, p. 40. Catalogues e.g. CHAMPION 1859-1864; LE ROY LADURIE 1983 vol. 2, p. 121-131.

<sup>22</sup> ALEXANDRE 1984, p. 223-225; ALEXANDRE 1987; BLANCHARD/ MICHEL/ PÉLAQUIER 1993; THOMASSET/ DUCOS 1998; BERLIOZ 1998, p. 7-26.

<sup>23</sup> Overview: DELORT 1985; BECK 1999; BERLIOZ/ QUENET 2000, p. 21. Earthquake: ALEXANDRE 1984, 1990, 1996; DRAELANTS 1996; QUENET 2003. Further BERLIOZ 1993, JANSEN 1993; GUILLERMES 1988, p. 176f.; LEGUAY 2002, p. 393-463.

<sup>24</sup> Grenoble: FAVIER/ GRANET-ABISSET 2000; FAVIER 2002; FAVIER/ GRANET-ABISSET 2005. Further: HISTOIRE DES CATASTROPHES NATURELLES 1993; BENNASSAR 1996; KAMMERER/ REDON 1999; MASSARD-GUILBAUD/ PLATT/ SCHOTT 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Research overviews: ROHR 2001; SCHOTT 2003a, 2003b, KÖRNER 1999b, 2000b; RANFT/ SELZER 2004b; NOWOSADTKO/ PRÖWE 2001; GISLER/ HÜRLIMANN/ NIENHAUS 2003b, p. 8-10.

<sup>26</sup> HOFF/ BERGHAUS 1840-1841; BASEL 1856; CURSCHMANN 1900; WEIKINN 1958-2002.

A pioneering role was played by the medievalist study by Arno Borst, mentioned in the first paragraph above, that first raised the historicity of a disaster in an exemplary way (perception/experience, interpretation, description, reactions, coping, *memoria*). His approach was received with some hesitation (e.g. JAKUBOWSKI-TIESSEN 1992; CLEMENS 2002; FOUQUET 2003, 2004). Further contributions to the development of historical disaster research were supplied by the earthquake research of Austria and Switzerland.<sup>27</sup> More suggestions and a focus on long-term processes came from the climate and weather history particularly undertaken by historical geographers and economic and environmental historians. This is strikingly interested in quantifying events and is characterised by the effort to integrate scientific findings (sedimentary and pollen analyses, dendrochronological data etc.) into their research and to acquire a European perspective through international cooperation. Here we particularly need to mention the work of and around Christian Pfister in Bern and Rüdiger Glaser in Freiburg im Breisgau and, with an eye to the international scene, also research from Britain to the Czech Republic.<sup>28</sup>

A special role is played by environmental history, which was first advanced by English-speaking researchers and has long brought out and delimited the connections between nature-humanity-culture.<sup>29</sup> It seems that the view of natural risks and disasters was initially blurred by the motivation – frequently ideological, it seems – to provide historical evidence for the contention that nature was threatened by humankind (SCHENK 2008). By contrast, topics covered the role of the economic, social and political exercise of power as human cultures deal with nature, and the resultant risks and disasters: human-induced natural changes could lead to the decline of whole cultures as – allegedly – may be studied on the example of the Maya ('disaster theory').<sup>30</sup> This theory evokes a kind of secularised apocalypse as punishment for environmental sins, the result of 'peccatogenic' research into causes (GROH/ KEMPE/ MAUELSHAGEN 2003b, p. 20). While problematic at some points, it is productive in that it opens our eyes to the way disasters of all kinds exert long-term pressure on cultures to adapt. In fact, the academic study of environmental protests in recent times has also led to questions about the way specific environmental issues are perceived – in view of present-day pollution and techno-

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<sup>27</sup> WECHSLER 1987; GUTDEUTSCH/ GRÜNTAL/ MUSSON 1992; HÜLSEN 1993; HAMMERL 1995; LEHNER 1995, p. 79-113.

<sup>28</sup> PFISTER/ HÄCHLER 1991; SCHWARZ-ZANETTI 1992; MILITZER 1996, GLASER 1998, GLASER 2001, p. 192-203, PFISTER 2002, GLASER/ STANGL 2003; ROHR 2001-2003; ROHR 2003; BROWN 2003; BRÁZDIL 1992; BRÁZDIL et al. 2005.

<sup>29</sup> General: JÄGER 1994; BAYERL/ FUCHSLOCH/ MEYER 1996; RADKAU 2002; SIE-MANN/ FREYTAG 2003. Collections: In HERRMANN 1989 disasters are not an issue yet; in SIEFERLE/ BREUNINGER 1999, HAHN/ REITH 2001, WINIWARTER/ WILFING 2002 there are papers on natural risks, nature perception and experience, while WINIWARTER/ KNOLL 2007, p. 260f. mention natural disasters; further: notes 31-33.

<sup>30</sup> For a sceptical view see RADKAU 2002, p. 41-46.

logical disasters, ranging from oil slicks to the Chernobyl explosion to ‘false eco-alarms’.<sup>31</sup> The perception of natural disasters was thus the topic of a special issue of the journal *Environment and History* (KEMPE/ ROHR 2003). Accordingly, the research training group No. 1024 of the German Research Foundation based at Göttingen University “Interdisciplinary environmental history – the natural environment and social action in Central Europe” has included “natural disasters in history” in its curriculum.<sup>32</sup> Natural disasters also arouse interest in connection with the emerging history of infrastructure that can be understood as the interface between nature and society.<sup>33</sup>

In view of the above mentioned importance of geography in disaster research, we hardly need to stress the central role of Historical Geography as a stimulus. Besides the disastrous flooding, it also raises the issue of handling risks and e.g. interaction between natural disasters and cultural landscapes.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, research into urban history makes a central contribution to historical disaster research.<sup>35</sup> From 1996 to 2000, the “International Commission for Urban History” studied “city destruction and reconstruction”, involving disasters induced by earthquakes, fire and water, city councils, internal unrest and wars. The published findings represent not just a stocktaking of historical disaster research conducted Europe-wide to date, but may also serve as one of its milestones.<sup>36</sup> Disasters are here understood as catalysts for urban construction, institutional, social and political change that, amongst other things, also triggered productive and creative responses like the professionalisation of fire brigades or innovation in law and urban planning, but also promoted social segregation. The European Association of Urban Historians met in Berlin (August 2000) with the theme “European Cities and Catastrophes”, and finally the section “Cities from rubble” of the German *Historikertag* in Halle 2002 was devoted to “coping with disaster between antiquity and modernity”.<sup>37</sup>

Yet other influences have continued to affect the development of historical disaster research. They transcend the ‘national’ traditions of historical research that have been outlined here for only a handful of European countries and that have become less prominent in the last few decades. For example, the UN Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (1990-2000) likewise contributed to raising awareness for the topic, as did special issues of journals or international

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<sup>31</sup> HÜNEMÖRDER 2004; ENGELS 2006; BRÜGGEMEIER 1998, p. 7-33; UEKÖTTER/HOHENSEE 2004; WÖBSE 2005.

<sup>32</sup> *Interdisziplinäre Umweltgeschichte – Naturale Umwelt und gesellschaftliches Handeln in Mitteleuropa*; Website (4.09.07): <[http://www.anthro.uni-goettingen.de/gk/download/GK\\_InterdisziplinäreUmweltgeschichte.pdf](http://www.anthro.uni-goettingen.de/gk/download/GK_InterdisziplinäreUmweltgeschichte.pdf)>.

<sup>33</sup> LAAK 2001; LÜBKEN 2007, p. 90-93.

<sup>34</sup> GLASER/ STANGL 2003; SCHENK/ DIX 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Research overview: KÖRNER 1999b, p. 12-14; 1999c; 2000b, p. 12-15; MASSARD-GUILBAUD 2002, p. 10-19; SCHOTT 2003b; RANFT/ SELZER 2004b, p. 10-16.

<sup>36</sup> KÖRNER 1999a-c, 2000a-c.

<sup>37</sup> MASSARD-GUILBAUD/ PLATT/ SCHOTT 2002; RANFT/ SELZER 2004a.

conferences, e.g. the section “Natural Disasters and How They Have Been Dealt With” of the 20th International Conference of Historical Sciences held in Sydney in 2005.<sup>38</sup>

### The network “Historical disaster research with a view to comparative cultural study”

This research situation has in the last few years caused a number of academics to give lasting form to the common interest in a specifically historical exploration of disasters and the need for interdisciplinary, inter-cultural, and cross-period exchange. They were discovered in the network programme of the German Research Foundation for young academics.<sup>39</sup> The network members come from Germany, Switzerland and Britain.<sup>40</sup> They are historians from different periods (antiquity, medieval and modern age) and specialisations (cultural, economic, social, environmental history). They are joined by historical researchers from other disciplines, Oriental Studies, Historical Geography and Chinese Studies. The geographic area to which their studies relate is primarily Europe, but also extends to the Middle East, China and the Philippines. The timescale reaches from antiquity to the present. In terms of the range of the areas of interest, most network members work on disasters in connection with natural hazards. In some cases, individual disaster types are at the centre (earthquakes, landslides, floods, famines, city fires). In other cases, the research focuses with its respective geographical context or systematic question not on an individual disaster type but on several types and how they interact. The network’s individual researchers strive to benefit from interdisciplinary dialogue – among themselves and beyond – and to open up a comparative cultural perspective on systemic issues.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> UNO: PLATE 1993. Journals: GISLER/ HÜRLIMAN/ NIENHAUS 2003a; SCHOTT 2003c; KEMPE/ ROHR 2003; NOWOSADTKO/ PRÖWE 2001.

<sup>39</sup> Website of the programme (4.09.07): <[http://www.dfg.de/en/research\\_funding/promoting\\_young\\_researchers/networks/index.html](http://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/promoting_young_researchers/networks/index.html)>.

<sup>40</sup> Anna Ayse Akasoy, Oriental Studies, Warburg Institute (London); Marie Luisa Allemeyer, Early Modern Age, Göttingen University; Greg Bankoff, Modern History, University of Hull (England); Andreas Dix, Geography, Bamberg University; Jens Ivo Engels, Economic, Social and Environmental History, University of Freiburg i.Br.; Andrea Janku, Oriental Studies, University of London (SOAS); Franz Mauelshagen, Modern History, Zurich University; Mischa Meier, Ancient History, Tübingen University; Christian Pfister and Stephanie Summermatter, Economic, Social and Environmental History, University of Bern; Gerit Jasper Schenk, Medieval History, Stuttgart University; Otfried Weintritt, Oriental Studies, Bonn University.

<sup>41</sup> On the problem of cultural comparison, which cannot be developed here, see only WELSKOPP 1995; DAUM/ RIEDERER/ SEGGERN 1998, p. 10-12; WERNER/ ZIMMERMANN 2004.

Their projects and common research interests do not motivate them to adopt quantifying approaches as with historical climate research or to add to the (long established) historical research into epidemics, wars, famines and other crises. Rather they focus on the historical exploration of disasters with a natural core. Topics include religious interpretations and theory-led interpretations of natural disasters, culturally influenced and media-transmitted individual and collective memories of them (*memoria*), and the specific local knowledge – particularly studied by cultural anthropologists – in reactive and preventive disaster management, interaction among societal, political and administrative structures, mentalities, technical practices, pragmatic coping strategies and learning processes in conjunction with natural disasters.

These questions reveal a broad field for research, which can only be indicated here with the aid of one example: If disasters can be socially constructed, what or who ‘makes’ a disaster into a disaster? If there are individual or collective authors of a certain perception and interpretation, is it religious, cultural, scientific interpretations that lead to the social construction of disasters? Are there certain people or social groups who dominate or produce the disaster discourse?<sup>42</sup> Are there political, economic or scientific interests linked to it? These questions are perhaps more burning than innocent historians would like. International research into the ‘climate disaster’ and the (economic) policy decisions based on its findings are creating business running into billions of euros. The topic of the network is thus not just up-to-date, its results could even be instrumentalised for the purposes of an ideology, corporate organisations, politicians and societal groups. It would thus be a rewarding assignment to shed light on this potential for instrumentalisation through a historical study. In the most diverse, also secularised variations, fear of the apocalypse is historical, when viewed over time, e.g. easy to follow in the history of discourse. Their culture-specific perception and interpretation also plays a crucial role with respect to reactions to disasters. The question about the cultural construction of disasters thus also prompts us to ask about their role in constructing culture. Of course, the immediate consequences of disasters are destructive, at first. In the long term, however, such disasters may have a regulating influence on the development of societies and environments, if regarded as ‘normal exceptions’. Experience, knowledge, scholarship, cultural practices including disaster management, prevention and safeguards through insurance are based on the expectation of recurrence, based in turn on the experience of recurrence. Hence they anticipate the future of the past. Historical research into disasters is – in a nutshell – a forward-looking discipline.

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<sup>42</sup> Case study: WEINGART/ ENGELS/ PANSEGRAU 2001.

## The first results, opportunities and lines of research

In summer 2005 the network began its work, planned for three years with a total of six work sessions.<sup>43</sup> This volume presents part of the research results reaped in the joint work of the members with their guests (FLAIG, ROHR, RUDOLF) and associated academics (CONTI, POLIWODA). Since this context has promoted the fruitful interaction of the studies, it will be briefly presented here.

The network's first working session took place on 16 and 17 March 2006 in Stuttgart on the topic of "Historical research into disasters: status and lines of research".<sup>44</sup> Apart from the network members, who reported on their current research, three guests structured the topic of the network in keynote papers.<sup>45</sup> The discussion with the participation of the specialist audience highlighted numerous wishes and fruitful cross-connections. Despite a heightened understanding of the subject of research, 'disaster', based on everyday usage, empirical case studies and the above-mentioned research approaches, it turned out that an in-depth engagement with the conceptual and theoretical instruments of analysis is essential for a successful interdisciplinary discussion. This particularly applies to the source terms specific to the respective epoch and culture. It provides initial information about contemporary perception patterns, narrative styles and interpretation patterns that today all come under the practical heading of 'disaster'. This approach is taken up in the first section of this publication in which, first, the early history of the word and concept *καταστροφή* is examined (MEIER). Then, in a methodologically complementary approach, source-language terms, semantic fields, *topoi* and narrative patterns for some phenomena (defeat, earthquake, city fire, flooding), that can today be conveniently termed 'catastrophe/disaster', are analysed for the period from antiquity to the late Middle Ages (FLAIG, CONTI, AKASOY, ROHR).<sup>46</sup> This does not just explore semantic fields, reconstruct contexts and sharpen conceptual instruments (FLAIG). At the same time, it provides modules for a history of the concept that still remains to be written for the modern age, and thereby helps to

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<sup>43</sup> Website with programmes: <[http://www.hist.uzh.ch/projekte/disaster\\_en.html](http://www.hist.uzh.ch/projekte/disaster_en.html)> (4.09.07).

<sup>44</sup> *Historische Erforschung von Katastrophen: Stand und Perspektiven der Forschung*. Conference announcement: <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/termine/id=5109>>, Conference report by Andreas DIX: <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=1111>> (4.09.2007). Besides the DFG, thanks go to the *Verein der Freunde des Historischen Instituts* (Stuttgart), which provided financial assistance for the conference.

<sup>45</sup> Thanks to the guests for their contributions: Egon Flaig (Ancient History, Greifswald University), see FLAIG in this volume; Kay Peter Jankrift (Medieval History, Münster University), "Katastrophen in der Vormoderne: Fallbeispiele" and Dieter Schott (Modern History, Darmstadt Technical University), "The Role of Disasters in Urban History".

<sup>46</sup> Thanks go to Stefano CONTI (Ancient History, Siena University) for his readiness to round off this section at short notice. Christian ROHR (Medieval History, Salzburg University) read his paper as a guest at the 3rd network meeting in Freiburg i. Br.

lay the foundations for a comparative time-and-space perspective.<sup>47</sup> For reasons of method, this largely confines itself to Mediterranean and European cultures that were variously intertwined back in the pre-modern era.

The second work session was on the topic of “Natural Disasters and Pre-Modern Societies”, held in Zurich from 7-9 September 2006. Thanks to numerous guests it was possible to broaden our perspective beyond Europe.<sup>48</sup> The results of that meeting may be consulted in Volume 10 of the *Medieval History Journal*, introduced and edited by the organisers, Monica Juneja and Franz Mauelshagen, under the heading “Coping with natural disasters in pre-industrial societies” (publication date 2007).

The third work session was held in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany, from 2 to 4 March 2007 under the auspices of Jens Ivo Engels. It explicitly dealt with the desired topic of “Natural disasters – theory, concepts, method”.<sup>49</sup> The guests joined in the discussion about the source terms and narrative styles regarding disasters in the late Middle Ages (ROHR), the analytic concepts of natural hazard, risk and vulnerability along with the pros and cons of sociological theory formation for historical disaster research.<sup>50</sup> This discussion is represented in this volume by the contributions of Florence RUDOLF and Greg BANKOFF. RUDOLF’s comparison of French sociology of hazards and German sociology of risks drew attention to the considerable differences in perception patterns in the two societies – on the one hand, as a hazard from outside to be countered with technology (France), and on the other, as a risk based on an internally dysfunctional society (Germany). The differing perception of vulnerability of cultures and resultant differing handling of natural hazards is also the topic of Greg BANKOFF. Understood as an analytic category, the historically developed and culturally formed vulnerability of cultures vis-a-vis specific natural hazards could serve as a parameter in intercultural comparison.

Conceptual, methodological and theoretical reflections will remain pale and abstract, however, without historical examples to put flesh on the bones. There-

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<sup>47</sup> On the history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*) of *Katastrophe* in the modern age above, note 9. “Histoire croisée” also calls for interlinking the methodological, linguistic and conceptual foundations of national historiographies, see WERNER/ ZIMMERMANN 2002, p. 617f., 622f.

<sup>48</sup> Programme: <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/termine/id=5867>>; Conference report: <<http://www.hist.uzh.ch/projekte/disaster/arbeitsreffen/zuerich.html>> (both 5.09.07) and Franzisca BOSSY: Die Wetternachhersage. In Zürich betreiben Historiker Katastrophenmanagement, in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung No. 215 (15.09.2006), p. 42.

<sup>49</sup> Programme see <<http://www.hist.uzh.ch/projekte/disaster/arbeitsreffen/freiburg2007.html>> (5.09.07): *Naturkatastrophen – Theorie, Begriffe, Methode*.

<sup>50</sup> This is an opportunity to express appreciation to the guest speakers for their contributions. Besides the papers by ROHR and Florence RUDOLF (Sociology, Strasbourg University) in this volume, they were: Stefan Kaufmann (Sociology, Freiburg University) “Bruno Latours symmetrische Anthropologie”; Roland Schäfer and Birgit Metzger (Freiburg University) “Gibt es ‘virtuelle’ Katastrophen? Das Beispiel des ‘Waldsterbens’ in den 1980er Jahren” and Franz-Josef Brüggemeier (Freiburg University) as commentator.



fore the second section of this volume provides case studies, again concentrating on Europe. The order follows the – naturally superficial – logic of the chronology of the Early Modern Age (MAUELSHAGEN, ALLEMEYER) to the present (DIX/RÖHRS). This order is superficial in that it would have been just as good to have sorted the articles by regions of risk (North Sea coast, river landscapes, cities, mountains) or disaster types (inundations, city fires, landslides). The system and connection with the first section are provided by the commonality of findings, conceptual and methodological instruments and questions: all papers deal with the perception of a certain type of hazard and disaster, and the resultant typical dealing with hazard and disaster in a region of risk. Central to all is the sociocultural dimension of this behaviour, be it more characterised by religious (ALLEMEYER) or political patterns (MAUELSHAGEN, POLIWODA, SUMMERMATTER) or at the level of scientific, practical or repressed local knowledge (DIX/RÖHRS). An important question for all is that of gaining experience and learning from the disaster, which is taken up explicitly by POLIWODA. The papers on fires in the Arab Middle Ages (AKASOY) and the German Early Modern Age (ALLEMEYER) or flooding in the late medieval Alpine region (ROHR), the North Sea coast (MAUELSHAGEN), along the River Elbe (POLIWODA) and in 19<sup>th</sup> century Switzerland (SUMMERMATTER) could open up opportunities for systematic comparison.

At the same time the collected papers show that the young research field of historical disaster research is far from being surveyed, let alone tilled. There remains much to be done and we should at least briefly sketch out the directions in which this research field could be paced off. One promising approach, already noted, is no doubt the analysis of the political dimension of disasters.<sup>51</sup> All questions related to mediating disasters seem equally fruitful – since a disaster itself can be comprehended as a medium (of God, or nature).<sup>52</sup> One could discuss the material nature of natural disasters, their irreducible core, the practice of disaster management and learning from disasters; finally perhaps also the *memoria* of disasters – and the way they are forgotten.

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<sup>51</sup> The topic of the 4th work session of the network, organised by Stephanie Summermatter, from 21-22 September 2007 in Bern was “The politics of disaster”.

<sup>52</sup> The 5th work session of the network, organised by Anna Akasoy and Andrea Janku, from 4-6 April 2008 in London will be on “Mediating Natural Disasters: Historical and Comparative Perspectives”.

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