

**Gerrit Jasper Schenk (ed.):** *Historical disaster experiences*. Towards a comparative and transcultural history of disasters across Asia and Europe (Transcultural Research. Heidelberg Studies on Asia and Europe in a Global Context), Cham: Springer, 2017, IX + 436 pp., 61 figures, 4 maps, 2 tables

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The Cluster of Excellence ‘Asia and Europe in a Global Context. The Dynamics of Transculturality’ at Heidelberg University is part of the Excellence Initiative of the German Federal and State Governments. Established in 2007, the research design strengthens the links between the rich expertise in Asian studies developed within Heidelberg’s ‘comprehensive university’ framework and the broad disciplinary scope of Humanities and Social Sciences. It focuses on case studies of the cultural interactions between and within Asia and Europe to develop an encompassing transcultural research approach.<sup>1</sup> The edited volume *Historical disaster experiences* is one of the key publications to come out of the two projects led by Gerrit Jasper Schenk (‘A6: Cultures of Disaster. Shifting Asymmetries between Societies, Cultures, and Nature from a Comparative Historical and Transcultural Perspective’; and ‘D17: Images of Disaster’). Twenty contributions in total, based on conferences in Heidelberg, Beirut and New Delhi, deal with concepts and methods of historical disaster research and with the materiality of disasters, by focusing on the natural impact and the social experience, the search for reasons and case studies in urban and rural environments. In the Heidelberg conference, the question of how to learn from disasters were highlighted, whereas the Beirut conference concentrated on the hybridity of historical disasters concerning nature, society and power. By contrast, the New Delhi conference focused on the transculturality of natural historical disasters looking at the societal ability to deal with such events through the use of resources from the local to the global context. A society’s infrastructure, economy and environment often determined the social production of vulnerability. The varied and particular local historical context of different forms and levels of governance and administration underscore different aspects to be considered when studying historical natural disasters in a global and comparative way (p. 39).

The timespan covered and the range of topics are very broad and reach from ancient Egyptian culture up to earthquakes and floods of the twentieth century,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/en/about-us.html>.

from Europe to the Near East (including Egypt) and the Indian sub-continent, and from Black Death to volcanic eruptions and the management of avalanches in the Swiss Alps. Due to the limited space it has available, this review will focus on conceptual considerations towards a transcultural disaster history and on selected articles focusing on the Middle Ages in the three key areas of investigation.

Part I is dedicated to the state of research, concepts and methods. The editor Gerrit Jasper Schenk undertakes, as the title says, “First Steps Toward a Comparative and Transcultural History Across Asia and Europe in the Preindustrial Era” (p. 3–44). In his article, he presents the main topics of the volume by providing a rich overview of the state of the art in historical disaster research. He pays particular attention to the translational conceptual history of ‘disaster’ and ‘catastrophe’ as well as on the concept of ‘cultures of disaster’ developed by Greg Bankoff in his pioneering study on disaster perception and management in the Philippines (2003). Schenk also discusses concepts of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ shaped by a European mind-set as ‘dichotomous entities’ (p. 4) and refers to approaches to analyse those dichotomies from Fernand Braudel to the ‘symmetrical anthropology’ of Bruno Latour. Schenk himself speaks instead of ‘societal relationships with nature’ (“gesellschaftliche Naturverhältnisse”) understood as a ‘non-eternal relationship between ‘society’ and ‘nature’” and characterised by production and consumption processes (p. 13 sq.). Schenk’s footnotes contain a huge number of bibliographical references and can serve as a reliable and well-structured starting point for any further conceptual research in historical disaster studies. The second conceptual article by the above-mentioned Greg Bankoff (“Living with Hazard. Disaster Subcultures, Disaster Cultures and Risk-Mitigating Strategies”, p. 45–59) once again comes back to the concept of ‘cultures of disaster’, i. e. cultural adaptations whereby people modified their behaviour and the environment around them to accommodate hazards they were exposed to on a frequent basis. His examples reach from thirteenth-century English lowlands, where organisational life was characterised by communitarian associations that developed around the care and upkeep of the sea walls, dykes and ditches, to the disaster cultures in early modern and contemporary Philippines facing typhoons, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods and landslides.

Part II on the materiality of disasters is mostly focused on medieval examples. Juliette Rassi (“Several Natural Disasters in the Middle East [at the Beginning of the Eleventh Century] and Their Consequences”, p. 63–79) discusses several natural disasters such as floods, snowfall and storms in the Middle East at the beginning of the eleventh century and their consequences. According to the narrative Arabic sources, these disasters had serious

consequences for the population and the economy. Hence, the ‘Abbāsīd state in the Middle East and the Fāṭimid state in Egypt took measures at the time to limit damage and prevent a more serious aftermath. Sarah Büssow-Schmitz (“‘Fanā’ and ‘Fasād’. Perceptions and Concepts of Crises and Disasters in Fourteenth-Century Egypt”, p. 81–91) concentrates on the Mamlūk Empire in the fourteenth century. She shows that contemporaries distinguished between two types of disasters: The term “fasād” was linked to social causes that could be fought, whereas “fanā” suggests an act with extra-social roots and without any possibility of avoidance. Two more articles deal with volcanic eruptions. Martin Bauch (“The Day the Sun Turned Blue. A Volcanic Eruption in the Early 1460s and Its Possible Climatic Impact – A Natural Disaster Perceived Globally in the Late Middle Ages?”, p. 107–138) looks at the strange atmospheric phenomena visible all over Europe in September 1465, which he interprets as the result of a volcanic dust veil, possibly originating from a re-dated eruption of Mount Kuwae in Vanuatu. There is ample evidence of ‘years without summers’ from 1465 to 1469 and their subsequent agricultural, economic and social impact. Taking a global perspective on these years, he raises doubt about assigning any clear pattern. The non-European evidence reveals a fuzzier picture and shows that the events had really global consequences, although they were less cataclysmic than we would normally expect from a Tambora-like event (1815 and the following years). George Saliba (“Cultural Implications of Natural Disasters. Historical Reports of the Volcano Eruption of July, 1256 CE”, p. 139–154) provides a survey of historical reports on the volcanic eruption of 1256 not far from Medina. The paper deconstructs these reports in order to reveal the social, political and religious reactions that were provoked by the disastrous eruption. The author tries to sort myth from fact, the rhetorical from the literal, the religious from the political and finally the theoretical-judicial from the devotional and practical. He highlights the manner in which religious rituals, such as communal prayers, congregating at a holy place and reminding political authorities of their religious duties could be manipulated during times of disasters to produce political change and improve the social conditions of the community afflicted by such disasters.

Part III, entitled “Heaven and Earth. Searching for Reasons”, focuses on different types of disaster prediction, namely astro-meteorological explanations. However, all the types discussed in this part refer to eras other than the Middle Ages. They deal with disaster prediction in ancient Egypt (Joachim Friedrich Quack, “‘Assur Will Suffer’. Predicting Disaster in Ancient Egypt”, p. 189–206), the interpretation of ‘natural’ disasters in the Arabic astro-meteorological “malḥama” handbooks of the sixteenth century (Kristine Chalyan-Daffner, “‘Natural’ Disasters in the Arabic Astro-meteorological Malḥama Handbooks”, p. 207–223), Indian Sanskrit

texts on Indian astrology and the divination of natural disasters and threats (Audrius Beinorius, “Tracing the Will of the Stars. Indian Astrology and Divination About Natural Disasters and Threats”, p. 225–239), and the role of science, astrology, and ‘rumours’ during the 1934 Bihar-Nepal earthquake (Eleonor Marcussen, “Explaining the 1934 Bihar-Nepal Earthquake. The Role of Science, Astrology, and ‘Rumours’”, p. 241–266).

Moreover, part IV mostly refers to non-medieval examples, except from Syrinx von Hees (“‘The Great Fire in Cairo in 1321’. Interactions Between Nature and Society”, p. 307–326) who focuses on the great fire in Cairo in 1321. Based on six reports, four contemporary reports and two that were written later, she explores the ways in which urban Mamlūk society reacted to this disaster. Looking at the firefighting and the preventive measures, she argues that – contrary to the mainstream argument that pre-modern Muslim societies were mainly seeking help from God when confronted with disasters – the sources provide a distorted picture, and that researchers are able to maintain such an opinion because they rely upon singular reports while ignoring these reports’ special narrative strategies. Concerning the explanations, von Hees shows that the interpretation as acts of arson committed by Christians was just one convenient explanation among several others that later authors took for granted.

The final part, part V, looks at frequent experience and adaptation strategies. Again, only one article by Thomas Labbé (“Economic Adaptation to Risky Environments in the Late Middle Ages. The Case of the ‘Accrués’ of the Doubs in Chaussin [Jura, France] from c. 1370 to c. 1500”, p. 355–367) is dedicated to medieval issues. The author takes the French Jura as an example for how late medieval societies adapted economically to risky environments. Because of frequent floods of the Doubs River, some lands were washed away and others emerged, which were called the “accrués”. Examining the administration of the dukes of Burgundy in this region, Labbé shows that the writ of an original planning management of the territory was clearly developed as a result of ‘long term perception of disaster’ (p. 366).

The quality of the single papers is high throughout. Typos are very few (but e. g. read ‘often’ instead of ‘oft’ on p. 47 l. 5 from the bottom). The wide range of topics and the large timespan is both a strength and weakness of the book. These topics enable the reader to get multifarious insights into different concepts, perceptions and interpretations of disasters in different eras and regions. However, what is missing is a final summarising paper to ‘compose a picture from the mosaic of these individual findings’ (p. 42). Gerrit Jasper Schenk tries to do this in advance in his introduction, but his four conclusions remain very short (p. 42–44). Firstly, he argues that in the Middle Ages and the early modern period, a limited number of concepts, ideas and practices were already

travelling not only between regional 'subcultures of disaster', but also between Asia and Europe and vice versa, namely astro-meteorological concepts and practices, the deluge as punishment for a sinful world, the Apocalypse and the search for culprits after disasters. Secondly, he points out that the intellectual legacy of ancient cultures, be it Mesopotamia, Israel, Greece or Rome, played a significant bridging role between India, Arab countries and Europe. The coastal regions around the Mediterranean Sea (and maybe also the Red Sea and the Western Indian Ocean) obviously served as important contact zones. Thirdly, it seems that in the pre-industrial era a number of patterns for interpreting extreme natural events (e. g. disaster as omen, admonition or divine judgement) and some socio-cultural reactions were more or less common among different cultures. Schenk leaves it an open question whether there is a common ground for this in the overall similar sociocultural relationship of communities, societies or cultures to the surrounding world, or whether it has been a result of exchange, entanglement and shared learning processes. Finally, with regard to the eighteenth century onwards, he points out that processes of 'glocalisation' (Roland Robertson) also took place in cultures dealing with disasters centuries prior to the industrial era. Instead of forming a common 'culture of disaster', however, it seems that the increasing entanglement of a globalising world in a colonial context is characterised by an increasing difference between different 'cultures of disaster' in Asia and Europe.

Altogether, this is a very stimulating collection of articles, not only for scholars interested in historical disaster research but also for those working in Religious Studies, European and Asian Philology and Art History. It will be an essential starting point and reference for any further studies in this field.