CONFERENCE ORGANISED BY KARL JASPERS CENTRE FOR TRANSCULTURAL STUDIES
HEIDELBERG UNIVERSITY
IN COOPERATION WITH ORIENT INSTITUTE BEIRUT-LEBANON

25-27 MARCH 2010

“HYBRIDITY OF HISTORICAL DISASTERS. NATURE, SOCIETY AND POWER”

بنية الكوارث التاريخية بين الطبيعة و المجتمع و السلطة.

Cover picture: University Library of Munich, 2°A.lat. 159#2

Designed by Kristine Chalyan-Daffner
A natural hazard with a catastrophic outcome, henceforth called here “natural disaster”, is often a result of interaction and impact of different factors: physical, cultural, social, economic and political — an argument which strongly emphasizes the hybrid character of a disaster. Its examination crosses the boundaries of natural and cultural, nature and society, which makes it equally an object of natural and social sciences. This binary character can be a starting point of an analysis in terms of actor-network theory of Bruno Latour, developed as a criticism on the engineered Modern Era with its ontological separation of ‘subject’ and ‘object’, ‘human’ and ‘nature’.

Our examination intends to start with contributions from the interpretative humanities and social sciences because natural disasters can be best understood when their physical dimensions are interpreted by their cultural meanings. For Arab authors the occurrence of natural disasters was a phenomenon to be dealt with on many different levels which explains the existence of multiple meanings. Therefore, the natural phenomena were often perceived as God’s signs and were embedded in various theological, cosmological and political discourses. However, the most striking feature of the discussions of God’s signs is the mixing of information drawn from astronomy and natural philosophy with a wealth of other non-scientific knowledge — in a way conflating religion, cosmology, myths, politics and ‘science’.

Bearing all this in mind, the aim of the current conference is to highlight the type of differentiations (categories, concepts, interpretation models) of natural disasters especially for the area of the Islamic Middle East from Middle Ages to Early Modern Times. Accordingly, the questions guiding the conference include:

- What did natural phenomena (e.g. earthquakes, floods, droughts, storms etc.) mean to the Medieval or Pre-modern Arab culture?
- What is its context and language used to portray its risks?
- Is there an apparent interrelation between a natural disaster and a political system, a likelihood of inter-state conflicts and collapse of social order? To what extent administrations can be held responsible for the good or bad handling of the disaster?

To sum up, the following issues take centre stage: the relation of humans to nature, the role of perception and interpretation patterns in dealing with disasters, the spectrum of concrete reactions of the public and the role of administration and governance especially in controlling water and irrigation systems. Finally, the conference endeavours to bridge these overlapping diverse themes putting cultural as well as historical concerns at its heart.

Venue: Orient Institute Beirut (OIB), Zokak el-Blat, Rue Hussein Beyhum
P.O.Box 11-2988, Beirut - Lebanon

Thursday, 25th of March, 2010

14.00-14.15  Gerrit Jasper Schenk (Darmstadt/ Heidelberg)
*Welcome and Introduction*

*Chair:* Eleonor Marcussen (Heidelberg)

14.25-15.05  Steffen Vogt, R. Glaser, Gh. Al Dyab, D. Riemann (Freiburg)
*Arabic Documentary Data as a Proxy for High Resolution Climate Reconstruction*

*Coffee Break*

15.25-16.05  Marisa Ensor (Cairo)
*Learning from Disasters in Egypt: The Role of History, Education and Local Knowledge*

16.15-16.55  Syrinx von Hees (Beirut)
*Fires in Cairo – Interactions between Nature and Society*

Friday, 26th of March, 2010

*Chair:* Susanne Enderwitz (Heidelberg)

9.15-9.55  Juliette Rassi (Beirut)
*Quelques Catastrophes Naturelles en Orient (au début du 11ème Siècle) et leurs Conséquences*

10.05-10.45  Yahya Michot (Hartford)
*“Heavenly Disasters” and Legal Responsibilities: some Fatwas by Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328)*

*Coffee Break*

11.05-11.45  Kristine Chalyan-Daffner (Heidelberg)
*Natural Disasters in Medieval Arab Divination*

*Lunch*

Chair: Susanne Enderwitz (Heidelberg)

14.15-14.55 Konrad Hirschler (London)
Responses to Earthquakes in Egypt and Syria during the High and Late Middle Ages

15.05-15.45 Verena Daiber (Bamberg)
The 1759 Earthquake in Damascus and the Continuation of Architectural Tradition

Coffee Break

16.05-16.45 Stefan Knost (Beirut)
The Impact of the 1822 Earthquake in Aleppo/Syria on Urban Development. The City’s Foreigners’ Community between Integration and Seclusion

Saturday, 27th of March, 2010

Chair: Stefan Leder (Beirut)

9.15-9.55 Sato Tsugitaka (Waseda)
Prosperity (‘imāra) and Disasters (fasād) in Egypt during the Ayyubid and Mamluk Periods - Focused on Sugar Production

10.05-10.45 Stuart Borsch (Worcester)
Plague and Economic Catastrophe: Egypt 1347-1440

Coffee Break

11.05-11.45 Sarah Schmitz (Halle)
Fasād and Fanāʾ: Perceptions and Concepts of Crisis and Catastrophes in the 14th Century Egypt

11.55-12.25 Final Discussion

Lunch/ Excursion
PARTICIPANTS AND ABSTRACTS

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ARABIC DOCUMENTARY DATA AS A PROXY FOR HIGH RESOLUTION CLIMATE RECONSTRUCTION

Extreme climate events can act as physical stressors triggering and shaping disasters. Climate reconstructions with appropriate temporal and spatial resolution allow to assess the physical dimensions of historical disasters related to droughts, floods or storms. The paper will give an overview of the current state-of-the-art of such reconstructions for the Middle East. We will then focus on Arabic documentary data as a proxy for high resolution climate reconstruction for the Islamic Middle East from Middle Ages to Early Modern Times. Documentary records also provide information to evaluate vulnerability, stress capacity and resilience of people and societies.

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LEARNING FROM DISASTERS IN EGYPT: THE ROLE OF HISTORY, EDUCATION AND LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

The proposed contribution discusses the current state of affairs in the area of disaster preparedness in Egypt as resulting from both historical traditions and contemporary trends. I examine the extent to which historically established local knowledge, attitudes, and social structures have had a long-term impact on disaster management strategies and remain relevant in the present. From Medieval apocalyptic views that explained catastrophes within the scheme of human-divine interactions to modern understandings of human-environmental relations, local knowledge of disasters in Egypt reflects a rich cultural tradition that is best interpreted in historical perspective. Drawing on case studies of both historical and current disaster events in Egypt, I thus argue for a greater focus on the context-specific relationship between cultural understandings of disasters and communities’ efforts to mitigate their impact.

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Fires were a fairly frequent occurrence in the city of Cairo from the 13\textsuperscript{th} to the 15\textsuperscript{th} centuries. Conflagrations pertain to the category of “natural” disasters, which are caused, if not by lightning, by human negligence in the overwhelming majority of cases. Indeed, they can even be the product of malicious arson. In this case, they represent an extreme example for “natural” disasters caused by humans. By means of examining an exemplary row of fires occurring in the city of Cairo in a short span of time, this contribution aims, on the one hand, at exploring the society’s reaction to these events. How do historians of the Mamluk period describe the reactions of the city’s population to the conflagration, and how do they portray the actions of those responsible for the city? On the other hand, as allegations of arson were raised in this specific case, it lends itself to exploring in how far, by whom, and with which consequences, the provoking of “natural” disasters could be used as an instrument in political conflict.

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“HEAVENLY DISASTERS” AND LEGAL RESPONSIBILITIES: SOME FATWAS BY IBN TAYMIYYA (D. 728/1328)

In the collection of fatwas issued by the famous Damascene theologian, there is no reference to any particular natural disaster that would have occurred during his lifetime, apart from the destruction of the fields and orchards surrounding Damascus by a victorious Mamlūk army, which he considers as some “heavenly disaster (āfa samāwiyya) similar to locusts”. The Arabic terms used in these fatwās – āfa, muṣība, karb, ḍarar, balā’, etc. – may be as diverse as the causes of disasters that they qualify: floods, droughts, winds, rains, frost, thunder, cold climate, fire, disease, insects, rats… All these are however understood in reference to the “calamity” (jāʾiḥa) alluded to in the prophetic Tradition (ḥadīth) and command the same spirituality of submission to God’s providential omnipotence, of patience and of expiation. Although Ibn Taymiyya recognizes the extraordinary nature of heavenly disasters, he devotes to them no synthesis, nor approaches their aftermath in any specific manner. He sometimes speaks of control of the prices by the authorities and of solidarity with the victims, who are then given a right to beg by the Sharī’a. Fatwas examining the impact of disasters on contracts of land tenure are of particular interest as they show a special concern for justice, by sharing of the losses.

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NATURAL DISASTERS IN MEDIEVAL ARAB DIVINATION

In Arab sources different interpretations for natural hazards such as earthquakes, storms and floods existed side by side. The range of interpretations, roughly differentiated, varied from scientific, cosmological and mythological to religious as well as astrological explanations. Most of them have pre-Islamic roots and were inherited from earlier cultures. This paper will explore — as one interpretative model — natural disasters in medieval astrological treatises. It will give an account on how natural disasters were prognosticated based upon the rising or setting of certain star groups, zodiacal or meteorological signs, and how earthquakes, winds and other natural phenomena were interpreted. I will try to trace the origin and cultural flows in this special genre whose significance has become obscure with the passage of time.

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RESPONSES TO EARTHQUAKES IN EGYPT AND SYRIA DURING THE HIGH AND LATE MIDDLE AGES

Egypt and Syria have regularly experienced major earthquakes throughout their history. These earthquakes proved destructive to built environment and led to significant numbers of casualties if they occurred in proximity to urban centres, such as the Syrian 1157-disaster. This paper investigates how different actors responded to the occurrence of large-scale earthquakes in the period between c. 1000 and 1500. These responses included the immediate reactions in the aftermath of the earthquakes when people strove to find ad hoc solutions in order to survive, the mid-term strategies of administrations to cope with the effects of the disasters, and the interpretative patterns by the literary elites who endowed these events with meaning.

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THE 1759 EARTHQUAKE IN DAMASCUS AND THE CONTINUATION OF ARCHITECTURAL TRADITION

In 1759 Damascus was hit by two major earthquakes causing considerable material damage and human losses. The aim of this research is to reconstruct the applicatory reaction to this event using contemporary sources such as chronicles and court registers as well as restoration measures at the public buildings. For analysing the impact of the earthquake on public structures the architectural tradition of Damascus in the 18th century is considered and in particular its developments after the earthquake during the second half of that century.

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THE IMPACT OF THE 1822 EARTHQUAKE IN ALEPPO/SYRIA ON URBAN DEVELOPMENT. THE CITY’S FOREIGNERS’ COMMUNITY BETWEEN INTEGRATION AND SECLUSION

The 1822 earthquake changed the urban landscape of Aleppo. The central market district with its caravanserais and souks was particularly affected by massive destruction. Most of the city’s foreigners (the ‘Francs’) were living in this area in their apartments in the upper floor of the great caravanserais. This paper examines the different strategies these foreigners employed to deal with the destruction of their homes and workplaces. The immediate response to the disaster will be evaluated as well as long-term results that led to an important transformation of the urban landscape visible until today. This study combines different kinds of sources in a micro-historical approach: the reports that the French consul and other consular agents sent to his superiors in Istanbul and Paris will be completed by registers of the local Shari’a courts of Aleppo that shed light on a number of the foreigners’ daily activities.

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PROSPERITY (‘IMĀRA) AND DISASTERS (FASĀD) IN EGYPT DURING THE AYYUBID AND MAMLUK PERIODS - FOCUSED ON SUGAR PRODUCTION

Sugar production made of sugarcane, which originated in north India after the first century, spread both eastward and westward extending for many years. It was after the eleventh-twelfth centuries that sugarcane plantations spread to Upper Egypt on a large scale as well as to the Mediterranean islands, al-Maghrib, and Andalusia. According to the account of Ibn Duqmāq (d. 1406), the 65 sugar refineries (maṭbakh al-sukkar) in al-Fustāṭ were managed by sultans, amirs, the Kārimī merchants, and the Jewish sugar traders in the early Mamluk period. It shows clearly that the sugar production and trade were the “unfailing profitable enterprises” at that time. However, since the latter half of the fourteenth century, in addition to the natural disasters such as the spread of plague, the insufficiency of the Nile Inundation, and the damages by hot wind and rat or locust, the Bedouins (‘Urbān) repeatedly attacked sugarcane pressing factories and sugar refineries in Upper Egypt to plunder raw sugar (qand), sugar (sukkar), and oxen for water wheel (dūlāb). We will examine the causes of the disasters (fasād) proposed by al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442), an Egyptian historian, who experienced the price increases (ghalā‘), uprisings (fitna), and calamities (miḥna) as well as the severe administration by the mamluks during the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries.

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PLAGUE AND ECONOMIC CATASTROPHE: EGYPT 1347-1440

The Black Death had grave repercussions on the economy of Egypt. While most of the demographic damage was done by the late fourteenth century, the economic consequences stretched out over a longer period of time. Urban effects included a major crisis in the system of currency, in places pushing Egypt towards a barter system. Elite infighting sapped resources and morale. In the agrarian realm, the chaos was more intense. The dramatic decay of the irrigation system had a stunning impact on Egypt’s agricultural economy. Rural to urban flight followed in its wake. The relationship between demographic crash and these outcomes will be explored in this paper.

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**Fasād and Fanā’: Perceptions and Concepts of Crisis and Catastrophes in the 14th Century Egypt**

This paper deals with the Black Death and its consequences in 14th century Egypt. The first section introduces contemporary concepts of crises and catastrophes by presenting some findings on the related terminology in Arabic chronicles. It will be examined whether this terminology corresponds to a categorisation of crises and catastrophes as triggered by social, biosocial, and natural factors. The second section deals with social reactions to the Black Death. It focuses on two major social groups, Mamluk and Bedouin, and their respective reactions to the plague. It is suggested that the ensuing demographic and political changes may have led to an increasing integration of the Bedouin into Egyptian political life.

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