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Thomas Labbé. *Les catastrophes naturelles au Moyen Âge*. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2017. 349 pp. Tables, notes, and bibliography. € 26.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-2710-8947-2.

Review by Steven A. Epstein, University of Kansas.

This book begins with a warm preface by Jacques Berlioz, who places his student's work firmly in the camp of those historians working to return "the event" to the center of their craft, after its reported demise during the *Annales* turn in French history. In fact, *structures* and *conjonctures*—called here a postmodern negation of human agency (p. 11)—yielded long ago to the linguistic turn, in which some French literary theorists urged historians to take seriously the language of their texts, among other things. Berlioz, perhaps the most important French medievalist in the field of environmental history, made his reputation by studying natural disasters. According to Berlioz, Chernobyl and Fukushima represent a complex mix of human and natural agency with respect to catastrophe. They represent human risk-taking and inevitable natural events like a tsunami resulting in stark peril to human life and property. In the Middle Ages, however, certain types of natural disasters like earthquakes and lightning were as unpredictable then as they are now, whereas modern scientific advances have made it possible for people to foresee events like storms and solar eclipses, which surprised and astonished medieval observers.

This preface is very convenient to Labbé because it enables him to plunge straight into his own work, primarily on human responses to catastrophe, not the few minutes of an earthquake or the seconds of a bolt of lightning. He studies Western Europe from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, with an emphasis on France and some original work in municipal and departmental archives. Mindful of the *longue durée*, Labbé occasionally explores responses to disasters in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Environmental historians have found in the eighteenth century a great turning point in the conceptualization of natural catastrophes, with the devastating Lisbon earthquake of 1755 prompting a modern and increasingly secular understanding of the causes and effects of disaster. Labbé's excellent and wide-ranging book is essential reading for anyone interested in disaster as a challenge to the survivors as well as the grim toll of victims. This is a study to read closely and not merely to consult, especially because there is no index. Taking good notes while reading is the only remedy beyond the table of contents.

Labbé's project required a typology of disasters as well as a database of events. Situating his own work in the field of Disaster Studies, he wants to move beyond crisis and response to a larger conception in which thinking and writing about disasters becomes a way for people to organize and make sense of reality. He has a nice illustration of this concerning Napoleon, whose return to France in 1815 turned out to be a disaster (p. 18). Crossing from Elba was an event not resulting from chance—the ensuing months turned out to be a tragedy for millions of French people (and others)—and articulate contemporaries struggled to make sense of the experience as it occurred and afterwards. Labbé uses this example as a model for understanding natural disasters (e.g., fire, storm, and earthquake), which result

in immediate death for some and terror for others. In the aftermath, the problems of physical recovery surface as well as the need to integrate the experience into a model for explaining nature.

Most environmental history for France and elsewhere concerns the period from 1500 to 2000. The medievalist Labbé is thoroughly aware of change over time and sensibly concludes that doubling the length of the subject will sharpen understanding of these changes. His database, compiled by combing through annals, chronicles, histories, and a few diaries, yields 3,146 examples of catastrophes (p. 299). Numerous tables throughout the book provide bits and pieces of findings based on partial sets of examples, but there is no thorough effort to make overall statistical sense of the evidence. (Perhaps Labbé concluded such analysis was not worthwhile, but he might have explained why.) In particular, although the data inevitably thickens toward the end of his period, there would still be some benefit to an overall sense of the chronology of disaster, by decade, at least for France. Also, there are other databases containing good data on lunar and solar eclipses, earthquakes, and other events that might have escaped contemporary comment in the extant historical record. It would be worth knowing whether some types of events were more likely to escape notice than others. Partly because the bubonic plague of 1348 did not receive a great deal of scrutiny, according to Labbé (p. 291), this book pays less attention to disease in general and plague in particular than a reader might expect. Since he is an astute analyst of human response to disaster, the first great plague, as well as some other disasters, is a good opportunity, which is missed in this book, to explore the search for scapegoats and especially the massacres of Jews and lepers as certainly catastrophes for these victims. Since Labbé excludes manmade disasters from his subject, war does not appear either. But looking for people to blame for natural disasters is certainly part of any thorough study of the survivors and their search for meaning.

The first chapter of the book constructs a typology for medieval disasters based on the sensible view that any definition of “disaster” is culturally determined, and so the subject is the language of disaster (p. 39). Labbé explores the vocabulary of cause and effect and is especially interested in the terror catastrophes provoked. Looking at the landslide at Mount Granier in 1248 (killing thousands), the solar eclipse in May 1333 (blinding no one, we hope), and the great flood of the Arno in November 1333 (killing hundreds), Labbé emphasizes that medieval observers saw Providence, God’s hand, as the ultimate cause of everything, as in these amazing events. He concludes that medieval writers took natural events and constructed supernatural ones (p. 87), but the witnesses thought they were simply finding the prime cause for natural events outside of nature, in God.

The second chapter takes up this question of the mechanics of disaster in the natural world, as the author considers the providential explanations to be the froth on the waves and not what really matters (p. 89). Since many times medieval people could find no meaning to disasters (except as results of their sins), they did not blame bad luck but rather demons as causing their actual troubles in this world. Almost no medieval writers found any role for chance in these calamities. While looking at sermons and their illustrative stories (*exempla*) for evidence of contemporary responses to disasters, Labbé is rightly alert to the problem of teasing out common or popular views from the mass of elite, literate opinion. He found some sign for popular attitudes in what the clergy dismissed as superstition or worse. By the end of the Middle Ages more people were becoming aware of what they did to nature that caused problems such as deforestation and irrigation schemes, which fostered flooding. Venetians were acutely and precociously aware that they lived on a precarious place that needed constant management (p. 122). Comparisons to fifteenth-century Holland would support his argument.

Chapter three considers some extreme phenomena that terrified and amazed people for their predictive rather than destructive power—comets and lunar and solar eclipses. Lightning could be a sign, but it could also be calamitous to what it struck (the church steeples so often demonically damaged), while earthquakes could be brief harmless tremors or catastrophic. Some of these events, and even clouds of locusts, prompted observers to ponder the signs of the Apocalypse, the End of Days (p. 171): the ultimate, inevitable, but unpredictable disaster. In the calamitous fourteenth and fifteenth centuries,

many searched amazing events for signs of the end. The 1500s provided no relief to fears of the Antichrist, rather the reverse, a possible effect of the Reformation Labbé does not consider.

Chapter four takes up the emotional response to disasters in the later Middle Ages. Since Labbé finds panic and pleas for mercy to be part of the conscience-stricken people experiencing disasters, it is no surprise that religious processions, intended to appease God's wrath and seek His help, were an important part of collective responses. Organized by the Church or in some cases encouraged by local government, these processions, which can only be studied through verbal descriptions or rare visual sources, also occurred during times of plague. Labbé might have paid more attention to processions, an immediate response by would-be survivors.

Chapter five, the most original in the book, concerns the social and economic activities of local governments as they attempted to cope with catastrophes and begin the process of rebuilding. His archival work paid dividends here as bureaucracies experimented with tax policies and new approaches to charity to relieve the suffering of the survivors. Normal poor relief was overwhelmed by crisis, and Labbé treats the problem of homelessness in an astute way that no one to my knowledge has done before (pp. 232-35). Here again Lisbon was a benchmark, as it was the first great disaster to result in international relief efforts directed toward Portugal. Before then local relief prevailed, sometimes assisted by strong central government (when it existed) in France. Some political writers like Giovanni Botero encouraged states and other political entities to be liberal rather than simply charitable (p. 243). Since Labbé has gathered material on local responses from a rich set of cities, especially the intensely studied sixteenth-century Lyon, it would be useful to know whether or not the Reformation affected both the intensity and style of disaster relief. The Wars of Religion devastated large parts of France, and though they do not count here as a natural catastrophe, these entirely manmade events certainly cut a destructive path across the country and required the same sort of remediation an earthquake did.

Chapter six is another successful, original look at the evidence concerning disasters by looking at the use of numbers to measure deaths and damages. He finds the accuracy in these contemporary estimates to be on the rise from the 1420s and increasingly sensible in the next century (p. 259). Incredible medieval numbers, often depending on equally vague and exaggerated biblical ones, became less common, but the author needs to offer a hypothesis on why this happened. He concludes by taking up the theme of tragedy in early-modern literature as a way to explore contemporary efforts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to understand terror and pity as modernizing responses to disasters. His alertness to numbers might have taken in the rise of maritime insurance—the first attempt to calculate the risk of shipwreck, certainly a micro-disaster.

Labbé's lengthy and thoughtful conclusion (pp. 281-95) is a solid summary of the book, deprecating the usual dismissal of pre-modern history as somehow prehistorical and hence forgettable (my word). What did arise in the later eighteenth century is what Labbé calls a recognizable (he means secular) history of disasters. Medieval writers emphasized Providence but also provided some of the first perceptive comments on what we might call the history of human suffering. He is fully aware that historians are mainly studying the survivors, who, when subsequently homeless, impoverished, or injured, required help from others. This recovery also has an important history often shortchanged in Disaster Studies. Labbé uses the conclusion to bring together and expand upon a manuscript by the Italian humanist Giannozzo Manetti, *De Terraemotu*, concerning the terrible earthquake in Naples on December 4, 1456 and its sequel. Manetti was an eyewitness writing in the immediate aftermath in 1457. Although he produced what is plausibly the first long account of a particular disaster, it remained unpublished for centuries. There were no surviving classical models for such a monograph and no wider audience for it. The Lisbon earthquake sparked a number of immediate publications, most notably Voltaire, but this older one is a good witness to another worldview, and Labbé found many useful insights in it, especially the initial indifference or lethargy of Naples's ruler, in this case the misnamed Alfonso the Magnanimous. By the end, Labbé returns to the plague of 1348 and rightly wonders if the immense

horror of this experience accounts for the paucity of contemporary comment; perhaps in his words no one could describe it and few tried.

This well-written and eloquent book deserves a wide audience for the scope of its project and its sound scholarship, extending the study of disasters beyond their providential and scientific causes to the human condition and the history of suffering. By not limiting the study to France, Labbé provides a nuanced portrait of Western Europe over time as it responded to the challenges of recovery as well as explanation.

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