

Reporting on severe storms in Early Modern Time in the Netherlands and in the Eastern Alpine Region

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(Dated: September 17, 2009)

I. INTRODUCTION

In my contribution, I focus on pictorial (e.g., drawings by Herman Saftleven) and written representations of strong winds in the Netherlands and in the Eastern Alpine region in Early Modern Time. Two hazards serve as case studies: First of all, I will talk about the strong wind of 1674. It started in Paris, tore over Antwerp and Utrecht and destroyed great parts of these cities. Second, I will speak about the strong wind, which damaged houses of Abtenau (Salzburg) in July 1796. These strong winds shall illustrate my cultural historical approach. The focus is on how the contemporaries perceived, interpreted, managed and memorized strong winds.

II. METHODOLOGY

The methodological triangle *perception, interpretation, and management* used in Hauer (2009) is generalized to a fourth category, called *memory*. Figure 1 visualizes the analyzing square; the arrows show the constellation of the conditions. If a natural hazard occurs, the contemporaries try to interpret it (a). It is possible to manage a natural hazard materially without doing etiology (c) It is doubtful, if this is possible on a mental level. If something horrible is perceived, it often stays in the long term memory. The category interpretation is a preliminary stage of the category management. As soon as contemporaries had a plausible interpretation of the natural hazard, they could concentrate on management (b).

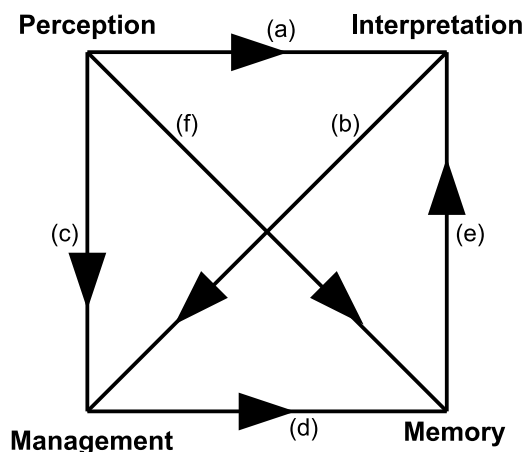


FIG. 1: Analyzing square. (a)–(f) denote the relations among the four methodological categories (see text). Arrows denote the presupposition-relations among them.

If the calamity is intensively analyzed, it stays in the memory (d). However, also the process of interpreting, the seeking/searching for a cause is remembered.

III. IMPORTANT SOURCES FOR A CULTURAL HISTORICAL APPROACH

A. Perception: An eyewitness account on the storm of 1674

Dutch original:

Free translation:

Uytrecht den 2 Augusti. Gister Avont ten half achten ontstond hier een schrickelick Onweer; dat tot half negen toe duurde; doch het slimste was gedaen in een Quartieruurs: den Hemel stont gedurigh in licht en Vlam, en 't was schrickelijck den Donder en vreesselijck Winden te hooren, dat verselt wierdt met het nederstorten van Schoorsteinen, Daecken, Gevels en Toornen, dat ieder een ongemeene verbaestheyt aenbracht, en dat heeft veele van een Aertbevingh doen spreecken [...] Oprechte Haerlemse Saterdagse Courant of 4 August 1674.

Utrecht, 2nd August. Yesterday night at half past seven a terrible thunderstorm occurred here, which lasted until half past eight; but the greatest horror lasted only fifteen minutes: the sky lit up continuously, it was terrifying to listen to the awesome thunder and violent winds, accompanied by falling chimneys, roofs, gables, and turrets, making all who witnessed it sorely astounded, and many people spoke of an earthquake [...] Oprechte Haerlemse Saterdagse Courant of 4 August 1674.

B. Interpretation: A broadsheet on the storm of 1674

SIR,

I Cannot refrain writing to you, to give you to understand the Wonderful and Miraculous Judgment of the Almighty and Angry God, whose hand of late hath been very heavy upon our Netherlands, and especially against that Flourishing and Renowned City (though now a City in heaps) UTRECHT; the wounds yet being fresh which we received by the Conquests of the French, by whom we were brought low and impoverished. Weh ad hopes to have had some time of refreshing; but we have received the contrary: For the Great GOD is yet pouring out his Vials of Wrath upon us. [...]

C. Management: Letter to the Hofkammer concerning the storm of 1796

German original:

Durch das unterm 31 Julii abhie(r) zwischen 7 und 8 Uhr Abends alda unter heftigem Windstoß ausgebrochen ganz ausserordentliche Hagelwetter, wobey die Schlossen in der Grösse denen welchen Nüssen gleich so schnell, häufig und tief fielen, daß man nicht einmal so viel Zeit gewann in den Häusern die Fenster halvirten zu können wurden in der hochfürstlichen Pfleg, Jäger und Gerichtsdienner Häusern, so wie in all andern Häusern dieß Markt und auch auf dem Gau die Fenster dergestalt beschädigt und zu Grund gerichtet, daß der alhierige Glasermeister sich bey nahe außer Stande gesetzt findet die erforderliche Zahl Gläser zu schleuniger Wiederherstellung in der fast aller Orten eingeschlagener Fenster wegen allzu weiter Entfernung der Glashütte und beschwerlicher Zufuhr beizuschaffen.

Free translation:

There was a severe hailstorm on July 31 between 7 and 8 in the evening. The hailstones were the size of nuts, and coming down so quickly that it was impossible to close the windows. The Pfleg, Jäger and Gerichtsdienner houses as well as all the other houses in the surrounding area were damaged so severely and there was such a long distance between the glass-works and the damaged houses that the local glazier nearly felt it was impossible to rebuilt all the windows in time.

D. Management: Drawings of the storm of 1674 by the contemporary artist Herman Saftleven

The artist Herman Saftleven (1609-1685) lived in Utrecht in 1674. The collapsed nave of the Dome impressed Saftleven deeply; he made 16 drawings of the collapsed nave from different angles (see, e.g., Figure 2). Saftleven sold the drawings to the city council, together with six other drawings, for 250 guilders in 1682.

E. Memory: A book on the storm of 1674

The Dutch author Thea Beckman (1923-2004) wrote a children's book on the storm of 1674.

IV. WEATHER CONDITIONS IN 1674 AND 1796

The weather conditions in the Netherlands were extreme in 1673/74. The winter was long and cold. The inland waterways, the large rivers and the Ijsselmeer froze over twice. Frost set in in the mid of November in 1673. Lakes and rivers were still frozen over in early April 1674. The spring was short and intense, the summer cool and humid, with numerous thunderstorms. There were also a lot of thunderstorms in summer 1796 in Salzburg.

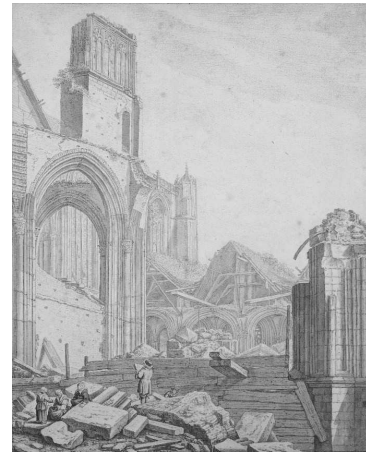


FIG. 2: Destroyed dome of Utrecht (drawing by Herman Saftleven; Archief Utrecht).

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS: WHY CHOOSE A CULTURAL HISTORICAL APPROACH?

The newer cultural historical research tries not only to mention but also to combine different approaches from various disciplines to create a more comprehensive reconstruction of historical incidents. This is only partly possible in socio-historical descriptions; the dimensions of incidents can be represented only partly by facts such as the year, the location and the number of possible victims. Similar limitations are apparent with a natural scientific approach which typically concentrates on weather and climate, because it tends to ignore the human dimension of how people cope with disasters. However, the newer cultural historical research focuses on the human dimension, on how people perceive, interpret, manage and memorize natural hazards. It gives us an insight into how the contemporaries dealt with calamities.

VI. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is supported by the Austrian Academy of Sciences (DOC-Stipendium).

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