

*Review of*

## **Exhibition on «Documenting disaster: natural disasters in Japanese history 1703-2003»**

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The exhibition «*Documenting Disasters: Natural Disasters in Japanese History 1703-2003*» was held at the National Museum of Japanese History located in Sakura, from 8 July to 21 September 2003. This was a unique and innovative project, documenting a truly collaborative research between scientists and historians in Japan.

The project started in the summer of 2000, when our application was accepted by the National Museum of Japanese History. As a general director of this project, I firstly aimed at searching for a new approach to the study of historical disasters. Japan has been struck by various and numerous natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions, which were documented in a variety of ways, such as disaster maps, private diaries and monuments. We planned to collect these materials from all over the Japanese Islands, and to exhibit selected ones for the audience to deepen their knowledge about various types of the historical disasters of Japan.

Here, introducing the exhibits, I examine whether they could make the audience easily understand the aim of the exhibition.

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### **1. The committee and the exhibits**

The committee for the exhibition project comprised 24 members, 16 natural scientists, 6 historians, and 2 staff of the National Museum faculty. The exhibition was composed of four sections, that is, tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and recoveries from them, selected from the big historical disasters in Edo period of Japanese History. The entrance hall and the stairs leading to the courtyard were reserved for the exhibition, occupying more than 1500 m<sup>2</sup>.

### **2. Galleries for special exhibits**

*Tsunami section* (entrance hall and stairs) (fig. 1a).

Located at the subduction zone of oceanic plates, Japan frequently experiences earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and tsunamis, the earliest recorded disaster being that of the 684 Hakuho Quake. The number of tsunamis in Japan totals 196 over a 1320 year period, averaging one event every 6.7 years, the highest rate of occurrence in the world. This figure is small in comparison with floods and earthquakes, anyway, it accounts for the low level of tsunami awareness among Japanese people. Fortunately, Japan's historical record, combined with scientific insights and technological advances, such as computer simulation, provides a rich body of information and perspectives on their hazards.

*Earthquake section* (first Gallery for the special exhibits) (fig. 1b).

Earthquakes have been recorded in Japanese historical documents for over 1300 years. In addition to the official chronicles written by the officers of the imperial court in the ancient capitals of Nara and Kyoto, diaries of noblemen and priests make frequent mention of past earthquakes and tsunamis.

For this exhibition, we selected five historical earthquakes, between 18th and 20th centuries. The 1847 Zenkoji Quake and the 1858 Hietsu Quake represent typical inland earthquakes. The exhibition also presented detailed distributions of seismic intensity in the Edo-Tokyo area for the 1703 Genroku Quake, the 1855 Ansei-Edo Quake (fig. 2), and the 1923 Great Kanto Quake. We tried to make clear not only the seismological features of these earthquakes, but also the social attitudes toward these natural disasters among people in the past.

*Volcano section* (second Gallery for the special exhibits).

There are many volcanoes in the Japanese archipelago. Of the roughly 1500 active volcanoes in the world, 108 are in Japan. This exhibition sought to illustrate important features of volcanic disasters by focusing on the representative cases of the Mounts Fuji, Unzen, and Asama.

Mt. Fuji is the largest volcano in Japan. During a very large eruption that occurred about 300 years ago (1707), abundant ash and scoria were ejected over an area reaching as far as Edo. Mt. Unzen in Kyushu is another active volcano. It had been quiet for 192 years before it erupted again in 1990. Mt. Asama is yet another example of very active and dangerous volcano. Its eruption in 1783 caused enormous disaster.

This exhibition aimed at showing that the more the people are aware of the nature of volcanic eruptions, the less they will suffer from them. Volcanic landscapes and hot springs are a pleasure to enjoy, but we must also have wis-



**Fig. 1a-d.** a) Stairs to the special exhibits: the banner shows the actual heights of the big tsunamis from the Edo period to nowadays. b) Entrance to the Gallery on Earthquakes. c) Entrance to the Gallery on Recovery. d) The Namazu-e, woodblock prints of the giant subterranean catfish, believed to be the source of earthquakes.



**Fig. 2.** The Great Ansei-Edo earthquake (11 November 1855) in a section of a coeval painted scroll.

dom to foretell dangers and to mitigate their damage as much as possible.

*Recovery section* (third gallery for the special exhibits) (fig. 1c,d)

Relief to natural disaster victims is a recurring subject of administrative records throughout Japanese history. But such records do not often provide detailed descriptions of recovery from the perspective of ordinary people. This exhibition sought to demonstrate the ways by which the ordinary people have recovered from natural disaster. It focused on three major disasters from the Edo period: the Kisakata Quake of 1804, the Zenkoji Quake of 1847, and the Ansei-Edo Quake of 1855, and on the recent Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake.

### 3. Conclusions

The year 2003 was the 80th anniversary of the Great Kanto Earthquake, and the 300th anniversary of the Genroku Earthquake, which also struck the Kanto area together with a tsunami. Three more museums in the Kanto area held exhibitions on these earthquakes. Newspapers and magazines had a number of articles in-

troducing these disaster exhibitions, and they seemed to be effective for drawing more than 40 000 people to our museum. Anyway, we can say that this exhibition was successful.

Our memories of disasters fade away quite quickly, as we can see in the case of the Great Kobe Earthquake occurred in 1995. No wonder people forget the historical disasters which occurred centuries ago. One of the purposes of the exhibition was to let people know more about the prevention measures for disasters.

Along with the scientific description of the disasters, these historical materials about individual efforts to reconstruct their own families, villages, and communities, probably gave more personal and sympathetic impression to the audience. Even if there is no indication of definite ways to prevent disasters, exhibiting the historical materials could be effective and persuasive.

#### REFERENCE

*Documenting Disaster, Natural Disasters in Japanese History 1703-2003* (2003), Catalogue of the Exhibition, National Museum of Japanese History, Sakura, pp. 167.