

# Earthquakes and ancient peasant cultures: ethnographic observations following the 26th July 1805 earthquake

Domenico Caiazza

*Soprintendenza Archeologica di Napoli e Caserta, Italy*

## Abstract

This paper describes the link between geodynamic events and myths and legends in popular culture over the centuries. In particular, attention is focussed on the different reactions of peasant culture in the wake of the 26th July 1805 in a rural area of Southern Italy. Two episodes are cited: the origin of local lakes ascribed to the earthquake, and the earthquake used as a means of repressing an ancient local custom of peasant farmers.

**Key words** *earthquakes – ethnological sources – Campania*

## 1. Introduction

Geodynamic events have often become part of myths and legends: from the Santorini eruption probably described in the myth of Atlantis (Scandone, 1987, pp. 78-83), to the eruptions on the Aegean Islands and the Phlegrean area (Bernabò Brea, 1978-79) which gave birth to the myth of the giants attacking Olympus. Eruptions are also described in the myth of Polyphemus, the blind stone thrower and Talos who barred the way of the Argonauts in the same way (Scandone, 1987). The saga of Archippe, the mythical city swallowed up by the Fucino, was confirmed by archeological finds after the reclamation which disclosed large flourishing bronze age settlements which had been covered by the waters of the lake (Grossi, 1980). These mythical transformations are not confined to the Mediterranean area: the eruption of Mount Mazama, a mountain over 3000 m high in the Northwest U.S.A., left a vast round depression known today as Crater Lake and described in the oral tradition of the

Klamath indians (transcribed by Clark of the University of Los Angeles, cited in Scandone, 1987).

Closer in space and time are other geodynamic events explained, as in our case, as the «wrath of the saints». The bradyseismic collapse of Pozzuoli, for example, was attributed in the late-ancient period to the curse of Saint Paul to punish the pagan inhabitants and persecutors of the Christians (Frederiksen, 1977). The relations between faith, paganism and catastrophic events of natural origin also emerge in the legend of the city of *Herbaliticum* (France, near Boulogne, not far from Nantes) which was said to have been submerged by the waters of a lake by order of Saint Martin to punish the inhabitants who continued to practise their pagan rites (Actes, 1843).

In the bay of Douarnenez in Bretagne there can be seen underwater ruins which according to local tradition are the remains of the ancient Ys or Yssa, submerged by the ocean in the early 5th century A.D. to punish the inhabitants for their lustful habits (Pansa, 1924). Alongside this literature which has mainly been studied by ethnographers and classical scholars, «classical» seismology also has its

own tradition. Among his many scientific interests, Montessue de Ballore also edited a collection of some Latin American myths and legends linked to earthquakes (Montessue de Ballore, 1906). All this evidence shows the complex relations that have built up over time in relation to earthquakes, to explain them, exorcize man's fear or simply to establish them in the popular imagination.

The case described herein is linked with the creation of a prohibition, and a peasant custom closer in time which may be of interest to historical seismology since the study investigated oral sources and written documents, particularly in seismic areas characterized by a long tradition of ancient peasant cultures.

The strictly anthropological and ethnographic features of this tradition will not be dwelt on here (*cf.* reference to the literature), but merely how the seismic event was absorbed into local culture and the main threads of the taboo which came about in peasant culture following the 1805 earthquake.

## 2. Popular interpretations of the presumed effects on the environment of the 1805 earthquake

The earthquake of 26th July 1805 is known locally as the St. Anne's earthquake, as it occurred on the feast day of that saint. The earthquake was a major seismic event which damaged many villages in Irpinia, particularly in the provinces of Benevento and part of Molise (Esposito *et al.*, 1987, 1991).

We have already seen how faith and morals were the two chief factors underlying the interpretation of earthquakes. As depicted in sacred writings, the destruction of a «guilty» settlement by submersion into water (sea or lake) in time came to symbolize annulment and punishment of divine origin.

This particular way of construing the environmental effects of natural events sometimes have given rise to quite false interpretations: it is odd that popular culture «invented» environmental effects ascribed to the earthquake of 1805, interpreting the origin of the small lakes

of Correie, Telese, Riardo and Vairano as the outcome of this earthquake.

Three different versions of one and the same legend link the origin of the lakes to the earthquake: a) while threshing on the floor on the day of St. Anna (26th July); b) the ground opened up to swallow everyone; c) in memory of the earthquake, threshing since then has stopped on that day (which is not a feast day for the Catholic Church).

The lakes, however, are volcanic in origin. The first is an explosive crater, a round chasm in the Marzano Appio plain which contains perennial waters. The second, the lake of Vairano, was formed according to tradition on the site of a large farm: legend has it that these events constituted a «divine punishment» somehow correlated to the 26th July, St. Anne's day (Zanfagna, 1986; Fabrizio, 1989). A similar origin is attributed to the small Riardo lake, where a chapel to St. Anne has been built.

## 3. Religious preaching and repressing the *allucchi* (chanting abuse): the earthquake as a means of cultural control

In the municipalities of Pietramelara, Riardo, Roccaromana and Vairano Patenora, threshers do not work on 26th July to this day. Starting from the core of references mentioned above, an attempt was made to explain how the earthquake was linked with a prohibition to work on the anniversary of the event (26th July).

Not working on 26th July is a practice which has nothing to do with religious or civil duties. The decision is so «introjected» as to have become almost a taboo, so much so that no one today can remember why without referring to the legend of the earthquake. It is also noteworthy that this area lies outside the one in which the earthquake was most destructive and damage was slight but enough to generate collective panic.

To understand this custom linked to the earthquake, it needs to be clarified that in this area threshers had the custom of chanting abuse known as *incanati* or *allucchi*, obscene

shrill verses of ancient Mediterranean origin consisting of offensive remarks made to passers-by who had to show they appreciated the abuse. In 1924 Pansa noted that the custom was in use at that time. It had been repressed in the past by the viceroy of Naples Don Pietro di Toledo, but had persisted in time despite opposition by the clergy (Scipione Miccio, 1846). In 1937, Borrelli described the custom as being entrenched in peasant culture and could give rise to rivalry and acts of violence.

After the 1805 earthquake, in a climate of popular fear and confusion (even in an area not directly hit), religious preaching intensified its censure of the *allucchi*, conjuring up in the popular imagination scenes of divine punishment and «submersion». The earthquake was thus manipulated to repress an ancient local custom to which threshers retaliated by going on strike. This reaction can be interpreted, in my opinion, in two ways: either to ward off the punishment of the saint of the day of the earthquake, St. Anne, or to thank her for having saved the village.

The traces left by this event and its effect on local culture are not central to historical seismology, but they do reveal the complexity of the reactions to earthquakes in ancient cultures which may give rise to practices or legends still in use. In addition, this particular case shows how decoding popular interpretation of seismic effects may not be straightforward. Interpreting the different sources underlying the collective imagination must not be simplistic, but should also take into account local ethnographical sources.

## REFERENCES

- ACTES DE ST. MARTIN (1843): Abbé de Verton ap. Salvete Eus. «*Des sciences occultes ou essay sur la magie, les prodiges et les miracles*», Paris (Ed. Ballière), p. 70.
- BERNABÒ BREA, L. (1978-79): Lipari i Vulcani l'Inferno e San Bartolomeo. *Archivio Storico Siracusano*, n.s. 5, 24-89.
- BORRELLI, N. (1937): *Tradizioni aurunche*, Roma.
- COTUGNO, G. (1824): *Memorie storiche di Venafro*, Napoli.
- ESPOSITO, E., G. LUONGO, A. MARTURANO and S. PORFIDO (1987): Il terremoto di S. Anna del 26 luglio 1805, *Mem. Soc. Geol. It.*, 37, 171-191.
- ESPOSITO, E., G. LUONGO and S. PORFIDO (1991): Il terremoto del 26 luglio 1805 nella diocesi di Caiazzo, in *Colloquio sulle scienze della terra in onore di Nicola Covelli*, Napoli.
- FABRIZIO, M. (1989): *Dragoni: il territorio, la storia, le tradizioni, II*, Piedimonte Matese, p. 132.
- FREDERIKSEN, M. (1977): Una fonte trascurata sul bradisismo puteolano, in *I Campi Flegrei nell'archeologia e nella storia*, AA.VV., Roma, 117-129.
- GROSSI, G. (1980): L'assetto storico-urbanistico del territorio del Fucino nel periodo italico (VII-III secolo a.C.), in *Profili di archeologia marsicana*, AA.VV., Avezzano.
- GROSSI, G. (1985): Ortucchio e il suo territorio dal periodo italico alla fine del Medioevo, in *Storia di Ortucchio*, AA.VV., Roma.
- MONTESUS DE BALLORE, F. (1906): *Les tremblements de terre. Géographie séismologique*, Paris.
- PANSA, G. (1924): *Miti, leggende e superstizioni d'Abruzzo*, Sulmona, 52-53.
- SCANDONE, R. (1987): Miti ed eruzioni, *Le Scienze quaderni*, 39, 83.
- SCIPIONE MICCIO (1846): Vita di don Pietro di Toledo, chapt. XII, in *Archivio storico italiano*, tome IX, Florence Viessesux, p. 22.
- ZANFAGNA, G. (1984): *La Confraternita del SS. Rosario di Vairano Patenora*, S. Nicola La Strada.
- ZANFAGNA, G. (1986): *Vairano, tra storia e leggenda*, Curti, 132-134.