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Heroes at the Epicentre: Our Lady and Saints in the Earthquakes of the Hispanic Monarchy (16th-17th Century)*

1. *Introduction: the transmission of information in the Hispanic Monarchy*

Ya escribi a Vuestra Señoría el temblor de Lima y su ruina
digose que en Napoles a suzedido lo mismo
[...] y mas dizen que en las yslas de Canarias a suzedido lo mismo
y que se an sumergido dos.¹

In the summer of 1688, the Madrid court was struck by devastating news arriving at almost the same time from Lima and Naples. The letters informed Charles II that earthquakes had destroyed two of the wealthiest and most important cities of the Hispanic Monarchy. In actuality, the disasters occurred at a distance of eight months from each other: the Lima earthquake on 20 October 1687, and the disaster with its epicentre in Samnium on 5 June 1688. Notices from the New World generally took months to reach the court, and in the case of the Peru earthquake, the arrival of the news in Madrid was further delayed by a particular circumstance. The viceroy had in fact sent off the official dispatches the very day before the disaster, “el dia 19 de octubre deste año a las seis de la tarde salió del Puerto de Callao la Armada para Panama, con cuya ocasion despaché

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1. Archivo Histórico de la Nobleza, *Osuna*, CT. 52, D. 2, s.f. Juan Ibáñez to the Marquis of Tavera, Madrid (10 July 1688).

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el Aviso”.² The concomitant arrival of the terrible news gave rise to all kinds of speculation: divine punishment had struck two dominions of His Majesty more than 10,000 kilometres distant from each other.³

The words cited in the incipit to this chapter are taken from a letter sent by Juan Ibáñez to the Marquis of Tavera, Antonio de Toledo Osorio. The nobleman’s agent, who was resident in Madrid, maintained an intense correspondence with his patron from 1687 to 1696, informing him of the most important current events: the social tensions in Catalonia, the movements of the corsairs in the Mediterranean, the imperial victories in the Balkans or the financial difficulties of the Crown. For at least a decade, Juan Ibáñez cultivated his contacts with the most influential politicians in the capital, who often passed on to him information of interest to the Marquis of Tavera. As regards the events of 1687-1688, as scholars are well aware, it was the king himself who sent peremptory orders that the sad news of the two earthquakes be made rapidly known in the four corners of the Hispanic Monarchy.⁴

By the early days of June 1688, the destruction of Lima and Naples was already common knowledge in Madrid. According to Juan Ibáñez, the often-confused information about the two earthquakes was the talk of the town, and there were even rumours about a tsunami that had swallowed up a couple of the Canary Islands. In the meantime, the agent reported that the authorities had not suspended the bullfights, “con todo esto prosigue la fiesta de toros, sobre esto se ofrezce mucho que dezir”, letting slip a not overly veiled censure of Charles II, who was by then a constant target of popular criticism. So, the earthquakes of Lima and Naples were hot topics at the time in the packed taverns or among the public at the bullfights.⁵

Disasters attracted a transversal interest in early modern societies, since most coeval interpretations of natural catastrophes were bound up with the religious and moral dimensions. Due to their unpredictability, earthquakes became a major component in a literary genre of marked

2. Archivo General de Indias (henceforth AGI), *Lima*, 87, no. 27. Duke of Palata to Charles II, Lima (8 December 1687).

3. Armando Alberola Romá, “Terremotos, memoria y miedo en la Valencia de la edad moderna”, *Estudis. Revista de Historia Moderna*, 38 (2012), pp. 55-75.

4. Domenico Cecere, “‘Subterranea conspiración’. Terremoti, comunicazione e politica nella monarchia di Carlo II”, *Studi Storici. Rivista trimestrale dell’Istituto Gramsci*, 4 (2019), pp. 811-843.

5. John-Paul Ghobrial, *The Whispers of Cities: Information Flows in Istanbul, London, and Paris in the Age of William Trumbull*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

sensationalism that was notching up ever greater market shares.⁶ In addition to Peru and the Kingdom of Naples, the Habsburgs also reigned over other territories of elevated seismic risk, such as Mesoamerica, Sicily and the Philippines, so that – as far back as the time of Emperor Charles V – the establishment was forced to make a massive heuristic effort to understand the reasons for earthquakes that occurred sometimes an ocean beyond the sovereign’s court.⁷

Although news of the earthquakes travelled in myriad ways, the politicians in charge of the Hispanic Monarchy tended to pursue a system of verification and refinement of the information sent directly from the regions struck by a natural catastrophe. The main objective of this internal administrative procedure was to arrive at reliable data that would make it possible to make the decisions best tailored to the interests of the dynasty: “no se padeziese algun horror en perjuico de la Real Hazienda de Vuestra Majestad”.⁸ Founded on reciprocal trust between sender and recipient, the collection of news implied corroboration of the data amongst the different levels of the administration. The procedure began with a report from the magistrate closest to the epicentre of the earthquake, which was then transmitted to the relevant institution where the text was examined before passing the news on to a higher body. In this way, the inner circle of the monarch could, in theory, count on having the most reliable information about every catastrophic event.⁹ In the records of the first meeting about the Naples earthquake of 1688, the Council of Italy assured Charles II that the information provided had been verified by various sources: “todos los avisos comprueban”.¹⁰

Based largely on manuscript documentation now conserved in the Archivio di Stato of Naples and several Spanish institutions, the purpose

6. Henry Ettinghausen, *How the Press Began: The Pre-Periodical Printed News in Early Modern Europe*, A Coruña, SIELAE, 2015.

7. Arndt Brendecke, *Imperio e información. Funciones del saber en el dominio colonial español*, Madrid-Frankfurt, Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2012.

8. Archivo General de Simancas (henceforth AGS), *Secretarías Provinciales*, leg. 56, s.f. Proceedings of the Council of Italy, Madrid (20 September 1688).

9. Gennaro Varriale, “Quando trema l’impero. L’informazione sui terremoti nella Monarchia Ispanica (secoli XVI-XVII)”, *Mediterranea. Ricerche Storiche*, 51 (2021), pp. 147-176.

10. AGS, *Secretarías Provinciales*, leg. 56, s.f. Proceedings of the Council of Italy, Madrid (9 July 1688).

of this article is to record the frequency of heroic actions performed by Our Lady or saints in the confidential dispatches concerning earthquakes that circulated between the various organs of the Habsburg administration. Moreover, the planetary extension of the Hispanic Monarchy gives the study a global perspective that highlights the presence of models and the continuation of the phenomenon over time, despite the indisputable changes in circumstances over the course of the two centuries. To this end, the chapter is divided into three parts, plus this introduction and a conclusion. The first section discusses the dominant interpretation of the telluric movements in this period, ranging from religious readings to naturalistic studies. The second addresses the various devotional manifestations organised in the communities struck by earthquake to invoke divine clemency. The third then considers the testimony of the survivors who assure that they were saved through celestial aid.

2. Earthquakes: natural unpredictability or divine castigation

Heated debates between scholars and academics about the environmental causes of seismic activity were frequent in the early modern period, although in *ancien régime* societies the most common interpretation of natural disasters continued to be subordinated to divine intervention. On 4 September 1679, for instance, a typical letter arrived at the Madrid court from the Philippines, which regularly fell victim to earthquakes. In the missive, the Audiencia of Manila illustrated the dramatic situation of this region at the ends of the earth, which was now further aggravated by the effects of a devastating earthquake that had taken place in December 1677. The local magistrates on the Asiatic frontier had no doubts about the origin of the catastrophe: “fue Nuestro Señor servido de que temblase la tierra con tanta fuerza que se vio esta Republica en el maior desconsuelo”.¹¹

In the first week of November 1659, on the other hand, an earthquake razed the province of Calabria Ultra to the ground. The news forwarded from Naples to the court of Philip IV was appalling. The viceroy, Count of Peñaranda, confirmed the collapse of buildings and monasteries

11. AGI, *Filipinas*, 23, r. 17, no. 53. Audiencia of Manila to Charles II, Manila (4 June 1678).

throughout the territory, where the number of deaths was devastating.¹² The news of the Calabrian quake was discussed in the Council of Italy for the first time on 29 January of the following year. In addition to supporting the reconstruction effort, the Council also invited the viceroy to implement stringent repressive measures to counter the crimes and sins of the Neapolitan people, since this was “uno de los medios mas eficazes para aplacar a Dios haziendose oraciones particulares predique y exorte la enmienda de costumbres”.¹³

Unlike us, as we have inherited 19th-century positivism, contemporaries of these events saw no dichotomy between the religious reading and empirical interpretations of the origin of earthquakes. Among the disasters that occurred under the Habsburg dynasty, the one most emblematic of this epistemological coexistence was, in all probability, the academic and social debate that sought to explain the earthquakes and the eruption in the Phlegraean Fields in 1538. In the first place, this event made Monte Nuovo a crucial benchmark in all the studies on natural calamities written in the following centuries.¹⁴ In 1779, the Montpellier scholar Pierre Bertholon de Saint-Lazare drew up a report reconstructing the history and causes of seismic activity that was sent to the Madrid court, where a new dynasty, the Bourbons, had been in power for over seventy years. Written in French and addressed to King Charles III, the text mentioned the disasters passed down by Aristotle, Thucydides and Strabo, going on to cite Monte Nuovo as the only significant early modern example for the interpretation of earthquakes. The author underscored the force of Phlegraean eruption that had completely transformed the panorama of the territory: “un tremblement prodigieux fit disparoitre le lac Lucrin, Tripergole fut abysmé et ses malheureux habitans engloutis”.¹⁵

The earthquakes and the ensuing eruption took place in the 1530s, making the destruction caused by Monte Nuovo a major testing ground

12. AGS, *Secretarías Provinciales*, leg. 30, s.f. Count of Peñaranda to Philip IV, Naples (29 November 1659).

13. *Ibid.*, Proceedings of the Council of Italy, Madrid (29 January 1660).

14. Gennaro Varriale, “D’improvviso un monte nuovo alle porte di Napoli. L’eruzione flegrea del 1538”, *Studi Storici. Rivista trimestrale dell’Istituto Gramsci*, 4 (2019), pp. 781-809.

15. Archivo Histórico Nacional (henceforth AHN), *Estado*, leg. 2927, no. 298. *Memoire sur les para-tremblemens de terre et les para-volcans par M.^r Bertholon prêtre de la mission des Academies Royales des Sciences de Montpellier, Lyon, Marseille, Dijon, Beziers, Nismes, Bordeaux, Toulouse, Rome, Hesse-Hombourg, Béziers* (19 August 1779).

for the empire of Charles V at the height of the struggle against Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent.¹⁶ The quakes had taken place in an area close to the capital of Naples which, during the mandate of Viceroy Toledo, had become pivotal to the Habsburg machinery in the Mediterranean, especially in an anti-Ottoman sense.¹⁷ Following the eruption, the viceregal court sponsored the creation of a task force mandated with illustrating the origin of the catastrophic event to the terrified community. Pedro de Toledo entrusted this urgent commission to the *philosopher* Simone Porzio, one of the most authoritative academics in Naples at the time.¹⁸ Starting from the first manuscript presented to the viceroy, the scholar defended the peripatetic interpretation of earthquakes, whereby the seismic tremors were caused by underground winds, hence adopting a stance that ruled out any intervention of the Almighty: “la causa è certa et della natura producta et per l’ordine dele cause naturale”.¹⁹ In view of his prestige, Simone Porzio monopolised the debate that engaged the various strata of Neapolitan society in those frenzied months, since the eruption represented a substantial novelty “per essersi estinta in tutto la memoria dell’incendio di Somma”.²⁰ According to Francesco del Nero, a Tuscan merchant who lived in the shadow of Vesuvius, Pedro de Toledo gave precise instructions to the Neapolitan workmen to dig “infinità di pozzi profondissimi fra Napoli e Pozzuoli” in such a way as to allow the underground exhalations to escape more easily.²¹ During the early modern period, the ideas of Aristotle, reinterpreted by St Thomas Aquinas, represented the dominant interpretative paradigm for the origin of earthquakes. More than a century later, in 1651, the

16. Özlem Kumrular, *El duelo entre Carlos V y Solimán el Magnífico (1520-1535)*, Istanbul, ISIS, 2005.

17. Gennaro Varriale, *Arrivano li Turchi. Guerra navale e spionaggio nel Mediterraneo (1532-1582)*, Novi Ligure, Città del Silenzio, 2014.

18. Eva Del Soldato, *Simone Porzio. Un aristotelico tra natura e grazia*, Rome, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2010.

19. AGS, *Patronato Real*, leg. 42, d. 7 (f. 1.). *Parecer de Simón Porco que embía el Visorey de Nápoles*, 1538.

20. Giovanni Antonio Summonte, *Historia della Città e Regno di Napoli*, vol. V, book VIII, Naples, Stamperie di Giuseppe Raimondi e Domenico Vivenzio, 1749, p. 230.

21. “Lettera di Francesco Del Nero a Niccolò Del Benino, sul terremoto di Pozzuolo, dal quale ebbe origine la Montagna Nuova, nel 1538”, *Archivio Storico Italiano*, 9 (1846), pp. 92-96: 95-96.

inhabitants of Santiago de Guatemala, now Antigua, even dug wells in their private gardens in the hope that this would arrest the quakes.²²

Despite accepting Simone Porzio's theories, in 1538 Pedro de Toledo also fostered the organisation of religious processions that passed through the most symbolic sites in Naples to appease the divine wrath. From the pulpits of the churches, various ecclesiastics delivered fiery sermons against an immoral society that had forced God to "castigar le scelleratezze umane".²³ The Milanese printer Francesco Marchesino, who was an eyewitness of the disaster, recalled in particular a liturgical cortege in which Viceroy Toledo took part. During this procession, the clergy, followed by a throng of the faithful, carried the head of St Gennaro to the place where local tradition held that the saint had been decapitated.²⁴

One particular question frequently arose among the members of imperial elite: why did God choose to strike the subjects of the very dynasty that was most strenuously engaged in the defence of Catholicism? After the Samnium earthquake in 1688, the ecclesiastical hierarchy explained to the viceregal administration that it was the lottery, known as *beneficiata*, which was the main cause of divine anger against Naples, since the desire for easy money had led to the proliferation of sinful behaviour among the citizens.²⁵ On 3 August, for the second time, the Council of State devoted the entire discussion to the order suspending the lottery issued by the Viceroy of Naples, the Count of Santisteban. The debate revolved around the report submitted by the Council of Italy, which had already expressed the various positions adopted regarding the viceroy's suspension of the *beneficiata*. The clergy energetically championed its definitive abolition, and Cardinal Marcello Durazzo, the apostolic nuncio in Madrid, became the most authoritative spokesman for the requests of the Holy See. The Count of Santisteban,

22. Cristina Zilbermann De Luján, *Aspectos socioeconómicos del traslado de la ciudad de Guatemala (1773-1783)*, Guatemala, Academia de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala, 1987, p. 16.

23. Antonino Castaldo, *Delle Istorie di notar Antonino Castaldo. Libri quattro ne quali si descrivono gli avvenimenti più memorabili succeduti nel Regno di Napoli sotto il Governo del Viceré D. Pietro de Toledo e de' Viceré suoi successori fino al Cardinal Granvela*, Naples, Gravier, 1769, p. 65.

24. Francesco Marchesino, *Copia de Una lettera di Napoli che contiene li stupendi, et gran prodigii apparsi sopra a Pozzolo*, Naples, 1538 [5 October].

25. Alessandro Tuccillo, "Abolire il gioco per placare l'ira divina. La diplomazia pontificia e il terremoto del 1688 a Napoli", *Mediterranea. Ricerche Storiche*, 51 (2021), pp. 177-202.

however, had suspended the lottery more to avoid dangerous crowding than to placate divine anger. He submitted the decision to the consideration of the court, after having already declared his own position in a meeting of the *Consiglio Collaterale*, the principal institution of the Kingdom of Naples: “la beneficiada no sea la causa de terremoto”.²⁶ Nevertheless, the only real opponent of the suppression of the lottery was Luis Francisco de la Cerda Aragón, ambassador of Charles II in Rome, since the proceeds of the *beneficiata* were largely “destinados en este a la embaxada”.²⁷

Apropos the earlier question (why against us, in particular?), the most revealing observation made in the Council of State was that of the Admiral of Castille, Juan Gaspar Enríquez de Cabrera y Sandoval. In his opinion, God punished *in primis* the injustice of the governors; for instance, France had not suffered natural disasters for years, despite the fact that there was not a single true Catholic in the entire kingdom there. To underpin his conviction, the admiral cited the story of the mystic “doña Marina de Escobar quando pregunto a Nuestro Señor como favorecia tanto al Rey de Suecia y la respondió, que quieres que haga si administra justicia”.²⁸

An immoral action on the part of a governor could even brand a territory for eternity. In 1619, the court of Philip III discussed a letter sent by the *cabildo* of León, in Nicaragua, requesting the king’s permission to move the city to another place, close to the indigenous village of Sutiaba. This operation was quite common in the New World when a site was considered uninhabitable due to the frequency of strong earthquakes, the proximity of an active volcano or the endemic presence of disease.²⁹ Nine years earlier, the city had been flagellated by yet another earthquake that had reduced the place to rubble. To corroborate their petition, the local authorities assured the sovereign that the area was cursed: not only had the

26. Archivio di Stato di Napoli (henceforth ASN), *Consiglio Collaterale, Risoluzioni e proposte*, vol. 52, f. 182v. Consiglio Collaterale, Naples (9 June 1688).

27. AGS, *Estado*, leg. 3319, f. 83. Meeting of the Council of State, Madrid (11 July 1688).

28. *Ibid.*, f. 86. Meeting of the Council of State, Madrid (3 August 1688). On the mystic Marina de Escobar, see Isabelle Poutrin, “Una lección de teología moderna: la vida maravillosa de doña Marina de Escobar (1665)”, *Historia Social*, 57 (2007), pp. 127-143.

29. Alain Musset, “Mudarse o desaparecer. Traslado de ciudades hispanoamericanas y desastres (siglos XVI-XVII)”, in *Historia y desastres en América Latina*, ed. by Virginia García Acosta, 2 vols, vol. I, Lima, Red & CIESAS, 1996, pp. 23-45.

inhabitants frequently suffered the destruction caused by earthquakes, but the livestock too was subject to continual infections, and, to cap it all, the insalubrious air prevented the birth of healthy children.

Why did God scourge the poor inhabitants of distant León? The members of the *cabildo* had no doubts on this score: “un tirano mato al obispo de la dicha ciudad y desde entonces es sitio maldito y descomulgado”.³⁰ This was a reference to an episode that had taken place about seventy years earlier, which is fairly well known among scholars of colonial history. In 1550, a group of assassins headed by the governor stabbed to death the bishop Antonio de Valdivieso, a Dominican and follower of Bartolomé de las Casas, who sought to improve the conditions of the natives.³¹ The person responsible for the murder, a highly idiosyncratic character, then led a rebellion against the Crown with the aim of re-establishing the Inca Empire under his own aegis, in the wake of the revolt led several years earlier by Gonzalo Pizarro against the Laws of the Indies.³² From our perspective, the most interesting aspect of the letter is the language used. The writer in fact supported León’s request to the monarch by leveraging reference to the two most important sources in early modern Europe: Christianity and classical history. Not incidentally, the report used the word “tyrant” to describe Hernando de Contreras, which would have called to the mind of Philip III the despots of the Greco-Roman age. In the end, the Council of the Indies accepted the plea of the *cabildo*, and the inhabitants were able to leave the accursed site. Since 1967, the ruins of León Viejo have been declared a heritage of national interest by the Republic of Nicaragua.

Given that natural disasters were the expression of divine will, seismic tremors were sometimes preceded by sidereal portents; in the accounts of scholars and survivors, the most recurrent sign was the appearance of a comet.³³ In early modern societies, astrology was considered a field of study

30. AGI, *Guatemala*, 43, no. 26. The city of León to Philip III, León (9 March 1619).

31. Guido Clemente Martínez, *Fray Antonio de Valdivieso: precursor del derecho de gentes en América*, Managua, Alcaldía de Managua, 2018.

32. Carmen Mena-García, “Justicia a los rebeldes. Relación de los sentenciados por el alzamiento de los segovianos Hernando y Pedro de Contreras”, in *Proyección y presencia de Segovia en América*, ed. by Mariano Cuesta Domingo, Segovia, Ayuntamiento de Segovia, 1992, pp. 72-92.

33. Gerrit Jasper Schenk, “Dis-astri. Modelli interpretativi delle calamità naturali dal Medioevo al Rinascimento”, in *Le calamità ambientali nel tardo Medioevo europeo*.

on par with any other science, and, in effect, predictions and horoscopes had decisive implications for the political scene.³⁴ Moreover, according to the Christian sacred texts, not only did earthquakes derive from God's anger, but portentous events were heralded by telluric activity. In this respect, the most authoritative source was the Gospel of Matthew, where several lines mention brusque movements of the earth as an unequivocal sign of the arrival of Jesus.³⁵

Consequently, in the discourse of this period, it was not rare for seismic tremors to be the prelude to greater evils. In the documentation of the Habsburg administration, however, the notion of an earthquake as a baleful omen was greatly influenced by the site of the epicentre: when one of the domains of the dynasty was struck by earthquake, the writers of the official dispatches tended to downplay such opinions. The proceedings of the Council of Italy meeting held on 23 July 1688 branded as superstitious the numerous inhabitants of Naples who had abandoned their homes because they were terrified by the catastrophic predictions of the astrologers: "ha sido ligereza dejarse llevar de los pronosticos que les anunciaban fatalidades de la ciudad".³⁶

Conversely, the representatives of His Majesty appeared inclined to accept the possibility that the earthquake was a presage of future adversities if the affected site was under the realm of a different sovereign. On Holy Wednesday 1580, the earth suddenly began to quake on both sides of the Channel; the English, French and Flemish have left abundant evidence of an event that was very rare in this area, which is now known by specialists as the Dover Straits earthquake.³⁷ The tremors caused enormous damage in London, where chimneys collapsed along with one of the steeples of Westminster Abbey, although the only known

Realtà, percezioni, reazioni, ed. by Gian Maria Varanini, Giuliano Pinto, Gabriella Piccinini and Michael Matheus, Florence, Firenze University Press, 2010, pp. 23-75.

34. Monica Azzolini, *The Duke and the Stars: Astrology and Politics in Renaissance Milan*, Cambridge-London, Harvard University Press, 2013.

35. Patricia Simons, "Desire after Disaster: Lot and His Daughters", in *Disaster, Death and the Emotions in the Shadow of the Apocalypse, 1400-1700*, ed. by Jennifer Spinks and Charles Zika, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 201-223.

36. AGS, *Secretarias Provinciales*, leg. 56, s.f. Proceedings of the Council of Italy, Madrid (23 July 1688); Giuseppe Galasso, *L'altra Europa. Per un'antropologia storica del Mezzogiorno d'Italia*, Naples, Guida, 2009, pp. 71-127.

37. Roger M. W. Musson, "A Critical History of British Earthquakes", *Annals of Geophysics*, 47/2-3 (2004), pp. 597-609.

victims were two children struck by rubble falling from a church.³⁸ The terrible earthquake became a talking point in the streets of London. In view of the widespread interest, in the following months several city publishers printed broadsides and pamphlets about the event; years later, William Shakespeare himself made an allusion to it in *Romeo and Juliet*: “’Tis since the earthquake now eleven years”.³⁹ Just three days after the tremors, the ambassador of Philip II at the court of Elizabeth I, Bernardino de Mendoza, informed his king of the earthquake that many commentators believed would be the harbinger of further misadventures: “el miedo con que a quedado la gente es bien grande teniendolo por ruin aguero del benilles algun gran mal”.⁴⁰

From the angle of the Hispanic Monarchy, without a shadow of doubt the homeland of superstition was the Ottoman Empire, the sworn enemy of the Habsburgs. On 10 August 1564, Garci Hernández – secretary to the embassy in Venice, Europe’s window on the Levant – sent a letter to Philip II. The dispatch revealed the latest news sent from Constantinople, where word had arrived of an earthquake that had destroyed the holy city of Mecca, so that the sultan and his entourage “estavan mal contentos, y lo tenian por mal agurio”.⁴¹ The art of divination and prophecies were not a prerogative of Christian Europe, and indeed astrologers were held in great esteem in Topkapi Palace. Although the ideas of the Divan, the chief organ of the Ottoman government, were deemed to be based on superstition, in his missive Garci Hernández nevertheless allowed the hope to transpire that the soothsayers might be right. An inauspicious portent for the Turks would mean a good augury for His Majesty in the Mediterranean.⁴²

38. Darin Hayton, “Pamphlets on the Earthquake of 1580”, (2013), blog, <https://dhayton.haverford.edu/blog/2013/07/17/pamphlets-on-the-earthquake-of-1580/> (accessed 24 March 2021).

39. William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. by Sidney Lamb, New York, Hungry Minds, 2000, act I, scene III, p. 46.

40. AGS, *Estado*, leg. 1523, f. 102. Bernardino de Mendoza to Philip II, London (9 April 1580).

41. *Ibid.*, leg. 1325, f. 34. Garci Hernández to Philip II, Venice (10 August 1564).

42. Cornell H. Fleischer, “Shadows of Shadows: Prophecy in Politics in 1530s Istanbul”, *International Journal of Turkish Studies*, 13 (2007), pp. 51-62.

3. *Invoking clemency: the processions*

The leitmotif of the written reports on the occurrence of an earthquake was the physical and moral desolation of the territories struck by it.⁴³ In the face of God's anger, the survivors had only one option: repentance. In 1560, the *Consell General* – one of the most important organs of government in Valencia – decreed the posting of an announcement convening the entire population to a procession “per placar e mitigar la indignacio ira e furor de nostre señor deu”.⁴⁴ A similar religious manifestation was, moreover, announced for the earthquakes that had struck another of His Majesty's possessions: nearby Catalonia. The edict provided precise details about the route of the procession, to be led by the image of Our Lady of the Forsaken, which is still greatly venerated in the city, ending in the cathedral where there would be “haura solemne sermo e prehicara lo Reverent e honest religios frare Matheu de orde dels frares menors”.⁴⁵

Despite the lottery having already been abolished in Naples, in September 1694 another powerful earthquake ravaged the tormented city, just six years after the previous one that had caused dozens of deaths and grievous losses. One week after the first major quake, the members of the *Consiglio Collaterale* held a meeting to assess the damage and address a situation that was, once again, critical. During the discussion, the Neapolitan magistrates explicitly asked Viceroy Santisteban to get in touch with the archbishop, Giacomo Cantelmo, as soon as possible to coordinate the organisation of the liturgical events necessary to appease the divine wrath: “se sirva Su Eminencia de establecer y ordenar oraciones y Divinos officios en las iglesias”.⁴⁶ The Council's urgent request assumed the consolidated notion that the visible collaboration between the secular institutions and the ecclesiastical hierarchy would, in the eyes of God, be the most convincing demonstration of collective repentance.

43. Françoise Lavocat, “Narratives of Catastrophe in the Early Modern Period: Awareness of Historicity and Emergence of Interpretative Viewpoints”, *Poetics Today*, 33/3-4 (2012), pp. 253-299.

44. Arxiu Municipal de València, *Pregones o crides*, x.x-1, f. 138v. Announcement for the procession, Valencia (1560).

45. *Ibid.*, f. 139r.

46. ASN, *Consiglio Collaterale, Risoluzioni e proposte*, vol. 73, f. 41r. Consiglio Collaterale to the Viceroy Count of Santisteban, Naples (15 September 1694).

On 20 June 1698, an earthquake destroyed the area around Quito, although the tremors were scarcely felt in the capital itself. Ten days later, an anonymous report summarising the tragic situation was compiled and sent to Madrid: the towns of Riobamba, Latacunga, Ambato and Patate had been reduced to rubble, the fields had become rivers of mud and hundreds of people had died. In the first place, the evidence from Quito confirmed to the court that, as soon as the news reached the capital, the political authorities and the clergy had organised a procession with “la ymagen de Maria Santissima que fue acompañada de los Santos Patronos [...] la nobleza y demas gentío entonando el rosario a coros por las calles”. The report openly declared the aim of the ritual: “esperamos que Dios nuestro señor ha de perdonar nuestras culpas por la yntercesion de su madre santissima”.⁴⁷ The highly detailed report contained one piece of information that would have surprised the reader: according to many witnesses, the earthquakes had been heralded by a miraculous event when, just a few days earlier, a painted image of Our Lady had wept tears of blood.⁴⁸

The almost total devastation of the area and the hundreds of corpses sparked all manner of speculation about the reasons for the earthquake. In September, another manuscript was drafted – alas, this too anonymous – which pointed out something rather peculiar: the earthquake had not struck any of the indigenous communities. As a result, word began to go round the inhabitants of Quito that God had wished to punish “los españoles quizá por los agravios y extorsiones que ellos hacen a los pobres indios”.⁴⁹ To support this idea, the writer also added that the Jesuit convent was the only building left standing in Patate, since the monks had continuously denounced the abuse of the natives. The interpretation was very similar to that made ten years earlier by the Admiral of Castille at the meeting of the Council of State on the abolition of the *beneficiata*: rather than infidels or heretics, God punished the wicked behaviour of Catholics. The rumour spread like wildfire among the terrorised inhabitants of Quito, and the bishop of the city summoned an Indian woman who had had a vision, namely that between “la fiesta de San Batholome a la de San Andres se havia de asolar Quito”.⁵⁰

47. AHN, *Diversos, Colecciones*, leg. 27, no. 58, f. 2r. First report, Quito (30 June 1698).

48. *Ibid.*, f. 1v.

49. *Ibid.*, f. 2r. Second report, Quito (September 1698).

50. *Ibid.*, ff. 2r-v.

After the first procession, the bishop of Quito announced three days of public penance in the course of which the religious orders paraded through the streets of the city with the relics and sacred images that were conserved in their monasteries.⁵¹ The rivalry between saints was a fairly common phenomenon on the colonial frontiers.⁵² After a natural catastrophe, the various congregations present in the territory would begin to push the idea that the saint or the image of Our Lady of their particular convent was the one best suited to abate God's anger. In addition to garnering greater prestige for the order, the selection of the intercessor also had decisive economic implications, since an increase in popular devotion signified more conspicuous donations.⁵³

Generally, a community's veneration of a particular relic or sacred image was much more consolidated in the Old World than in the Americas. This made turnover more difficult, although certain catastrophic episodes did lead to the change of patron or the choice of a new saint deemed to be more effective against a particular type of disaster.⁵⁴ In late 1620, the town of Alcoy in the Kingdom of Valencia was ripped open by an earthquake that caused massive damage and that left a wake of desolation in the region. Over two months later, the Marquis of Tavera confessed disconsolately to Philip IV that "vi ocularmente la gran ruyna de edificios y otros daños que recibieron".⁵⁵ Terrified by the earthquake swarm, on 3 December 1620 the inhabitants of Alcoy called a meeting of the Consell General at which they decided to entrust themselves to the saint of the day, St Maurus the Martyr, to protect the town from divine castigation. Over a year after

51. Giulio Sodano, *Il miracolo nel Mezzogiorno d'Italia dell'età moderna. Tra Santi, Madonne, guaritrici e medici*, Naples, Guida, 2010, pp. 15-103.

52. Mario Hugo Cuéllar Meléndez, "La lucha de los Santos. Corporaciones e imágenes religiosas vinculadas a la inundación de 1629 en la Ciudad de México", *Revista de Historia Moderna. Anales de la Universidad de Alicante*, 35 (2017), pp. 149-177.

53. Carlos M. Gálvez Peña, "Forjar santos en el Perú del siglo XVII. Representación política, agencia criolla y cultura letrada virreinal", in *A la luz de Roma, Santos y santidad en el barroco iberoamericano*, ed. by Fernando Quiles García, José Jaime García Bernal, Paolo Broggio and Marcello Fagiolo Dell'Arco, 3 vols, vol. III, Seville-Rome, Universidad Pablo de Olavide-Università Roma Tre, 2020, pp. 67-85.

54. Ida Mauro, "La diffusione del culto di san Francesco Borgia a Napoli tra feste pubbliche e orgoglio nobiliare", *Revista Borja. Revista de l'Institut Internacional d'Estudis Borgians*, 4 (2012), pp. 549-560.

55. Archivo de la Corona de Aragón (henceforth ACA), *Consejo de Aragón*, leg. 707, no. 44. Marquis of Tavera to Philip IV, Valencia (23 February 1621).

the catastrophe, a committee of inhabitants and local clergy travelled to Valencia to request a special relic from the city's ecclesiastical hierarchy. A finger of St Maurus, which had been given to the Patriarch Juan de Ribera long before by Pope Clement VII, was in fact conserved in the college of Corpus Christi in Valencia. The petition was granted, so that the group was able to return exultant to Alcoy where the relic was thereafter publicly displayed on the saint's feast day, the anniversary of the earthquake.⁵⁶

In addition to the confraternities, in the cities of the early modern period there were also other sites of social gathering, such as the communities of foreigners with legal status or the guilds whose members met with a certain frequency. The bonds linking these groups could be based on reasons of a profane character, or the members might profess a shared devotion towards a sacred image conserved in one of their chapels.⁵⁷ When a natural disaster occurred, the guilds or the communities of foreigners organised processions in the hope of obtaining help from their patron saint.

In Habsburg Naples, there were a multitude of foreign communities, among which the Hispanic *nationes* were always the most influential.⁵⁸ The Castilians had a church in a central location in the city: San Giacomo degli Spagnoli. According to the proceedings of a meeting of the Council of Italy, after the earthquake of 1688 the Cardinal of Naples organised a procession in the area around the cathedral, albeit with a restricted number of people to avoid dangerous crowds, while “la de Santiago de los Españoles se havia hecho el dia antecedente en la forma acostumbrada de que tubo el pueblo mucho consuelo”.⁵⁹ A couple of weeks earlier, the members of the same Council had proposed to King Charles II that he should choose a church in Madrid to celebrate a mass in honour of the patron saint of Naples “con invocación a San Genaro”.⁶⁰

The ceremonial and chief features of Catholic processions persisted substantially unchanged throughout the early modern period, while the

56. José Luís Santonja Cardona, *Iglesia y sociedad en una villa valenciana: Alcoi (1300-1845)*, PhD dissertation, Alicante, Universitat d'Alacant, 1998, p. 466.

57. Gervase Rosser, *The Art of Solidarity in the Middle Ages: Guilds in England 1250-1550*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015.

58. Piero Ventura, *La capitale dei privilegi: governo spagnolo, burocrazia e cittadinanza a Napoli nel Cinquecento*, Naples, Federico II University Press, 2018.

59. AGS, *Secretarías Provinciales*, leg. 56, s.f. Proceedings of the Consejo de Italia, Madrid (23 July 1688).

60. *Ibid.* (9 July 1688).

first globalisation – spearheaded by the Habsburgs and by the Portuguese House of Aviz – spread the Roman liturgy at planetary level. Latin America definitely represented the most emblematic space of a global phenomenon based on the imposition of a new faith, but the devotional representations of the region sometimes displayed an osmosis between conquerors and natives.⁶¹ In April 1689, a letter from the Archbishop of Lima, Melchor Liñán y Cisneros, concerning the earthquake that had taken place two years earlier, finally arrived at the Madrid court. More than a letter to the king, the communication consisted rather of a lengthy report in which the archbishop recorded the situation almost two months after the disastrous quake, “su movimiento que se reconoció en distancia de mas de 700 leguas”.⁶²

Don Melchor was a pivotal figure in the history of Lima, and he recounted the earthquake of 1687 to the king from a particular perspective. Indeed, following the first tremor, the archbishop had been buried under the rubble of a house that collapsed in the port of Callao, where his doctor had sent him to rest on account of a respiratory illness. Having been pulled out alive amidst piles of debris, the sick and now also wounded archbishop was immediately transported to a spot distant from the coast. As a result, Don Melchor escaped in the nick of time the ensuing tsunami that caused a huge number of deaths in Callao. From the “penosa prision de mi cama”, the archbishop sought to support the spontaneous reactions of religious devotion and public penitence that spread like wildfire through the city, “los hábitos de mortificación que los del visitieron, con las procesiones que formaron y con las cruces y coronas de espinas”.⁶³ According to the archbishop, in the days immediately following, the streets of Lima were filled with various processions organised by the parish churches and monastic orders. More specifically, Don Melchor reported to Charles II that “salido de su tabernaculo y iglesia de San Agustín el milagroso trasumpto del Santo Cristo de Burgos traducido de los Reynos de España a este mas à de un siglo”. Thus, the City of the Kings sought the help of one of the oldest relics in the American continent. In the same letter, the archbishop also informed the sovereign about the situation and reactions

61. Serge Gruzinski, *El pensamiento mestizo. Cultura amerindia y civilización del Renacimiento*, Barcelona, Paidós, 2007.

62. AGI, Lima, 304, no. 11. Melchor Liñán y Cisneros to Charles II, Lima (3 December 1687).

63. *Ibid.*

in the surrounding areas. The Bishop of Cuzco, for instance, had ordered “la milagrosa imagen de Christo” donated by Emperor Charles V to be brought out of the splendid cathedral.⁶⁴

The accounts from the epicentres reveal that sometimes the faithful were obliged to house sacred images and relics in precarious conditions because the tremors had destroyed the churches or made them unsafe. It is very likely that readers would have been most distraught by such sacrilegious situations. On 16 January 1644, an earthquake demolished Pamplona in the Kingdom of the New Granada, now in Colombia. The municipal *cabildo* appointed Lorenzo Llanos Cifuentes as general procurator, mandated to collect the information to be forwarded first to the Audiencia of Santa Fe and then to the royal court. In July, Lorenzo Llanos submitted a report, drawn up by the scribe of the city, containing the statements made by the survivors, most of whom recalled an image that was felt to be deeply distressing: “el santissimo sacramento de la parrochial esta con otras Reliquias en la plaza de vaxo de unos tolditos de manta”.⁶⁵

The disturbing news was not restricted to sacrilegious situations; some witnesses even claimed the presence of demonic figures at the centre of the earthquake. In the summer of 1586, the Flanders area – and the city of Ghent, in particular – was struck by an earthquake. The priest Pedro de León wrote from Brussels to the Venetian ambassador Cristóbal de Salazar informing him of the event. The letter confirmed the political tension in Flanders, which was immersed in the rebellion against Philip II. The writer himself described how he had been captured by the Protestants, who had released him thanks to the intermediation of an English diplomat. Finally, regarding the earthquake, Pedro León confirmed the terrible rumours communicated by other ecclesiastics who were deemed reliable. The survivors of Ghent described apocalyptic scenes: “vian al diablo visiblemente que mudo una casa entera de un lugar a otro, y hizo que dos hombres se matasen, tambien atormentava a una muger, y llevo a un viejo grande espacio en bolandillas”.⁶⁶

64. *Ibid.*

65. AGI, *Santa Fe*, 66, n. 141, s.f. Evidence of the royal officials, Pamplona (30 July 1644).

66. AGS, *Estado*, leg. 1538, f. 191. Pedro de León to Cristóbal Salazar, Brussels (1 September 1586).

4. *The survivors' evidence*

Therefore, following an earthquake, the various levels of the Habsburg administration had at their disposal a range of written communications from the areas that had been struck, foremost among them the personal testimony of the survivors. More than other sources, the often distraught reconstructions of the survivors triggered a more emotional reaction in the readers, who felt themselves defenceless in the face of God's anger.⁶⁷ On 26 June 1656, the Duke of Montalto, Viceroy of Valencia, notified the Council of Aragon – the benchmark institution for the kingdom – that an earthquake had destroyed the area around Ademuz, “derribo el castillo, la iglesia, la casa de la villa, y 40 particulares, quedando los demas edifiçios sentidos, y desenquadradas las paredes, mudose un monte de un lado a otro”.⁶⁸ To emphasise the gravity and impact of the disaster to the king's councillors, the viceroy enclosed with his missive the report of a Valencian notary, Juan Bautista García, who happened to be in Adamuz when the tremors destroyed most of the town centre. This text described the adventurous deliverance of the writer who, with some good luck and a fair dose of determination, had succeeded in escaping from the house where he was a guest: “entendió se le caya encima y huyendo de alli fue a la puerta de otro aposento adonde diviso una ventana [...] se arrojó y cayó de pechos sobre el texado”.⁶⁹

However, in the vast majority of cases, the survivors of the earthquakes avowed that their salvation had been made possible only through celestial intervention. A few days after the earthquake of 1688, Viceroy Santisteban ordered a first count of the victims and the damage suffered both in Naples and in other parts of the kingdom. The secretaries of the viceregal court drew up a detailed report in Castilian to be sent to the court of Madrid so that the members of the Council of Italy could draw on a broad overview in order to make the decisions most appropriate to the dramatic situation. In addition to recording the destruction of buildings and the number of deaths, the report also included a story

67. Elaine Fulton, “Acts of God: The Confessionalization of Disaster in Reformation Europe”, in *Historical Disasters in Context: Science, Religion, and Politics*, ed. by Andrea Janku, Gerrit J. Schenk and Franz Mauelshagen, New York, Routledge, 2012, pp. 54-74.

68. ACA, *Consejo de Aragón*, leg. 646, no. 35/1. Duke of Montalto to the Council of Aragon, Valencia (26 June 1656).

69. *Ibid.*, no. 35/5. Report of Juan Bautista García, Valencia (20 June 1656).

that, in those tragic days, had moved the entire population of mourning Naples.⁷⁰ Shortly before the earthquake, the friar Agostino Rudimado was kneeling in prayer before the famous relic of St Cajetan in the basilica of San Paolo Maggiore, built on the site of the ancient temple of Castor and Pollux, one of the buildings worst hit by the tremors. As soon as he felt the earth begin to move, the monk ran rapidly towards the portico, where, however, he was immediately buried by the falling columns. A couple of hours later, the rescuers pulled Agostino alive out of a pile of bodies and rubble. As soon as he came round, the friar began to ask insistently about the fate of another monk, whom he had seen holding up the facade with a single hand. The interpretation most widespread among the Neapolitans was that the other monk was actually “el glorioso San Caetano, que tantos y tan admirables prodigios a obrado en esta ciudad, pues la tiene devajo de su protección”.⁷¹

In the same report, the authors referred to what is perhaps the most famous miraculous episode of the early modern period linked to an earthquake. The story is well known because the person involved was none other than Vincenzo Maria Orsini, Archbishop of Benevento and future Pope Benedict XIII, who was buried alive when the archbishop's palace collapsed and not rescued until over an hour later. Dated 22 June, Orsini's written evidence was then printed by the Neapolitan publisher Novello de Bonis, transforming St Filippo Neri into the ultimate go-to protector against earthquakes.⁷² The archbishop's letter, translated into Castilian, was transcribed in the report so that the members of the Council of Italy should know about the miraculous manner in which the eminent prelate had been saved. According to Orsini, the floors of the archbishop's place caved in with extraordinary rapidity, so that he found himself submerged by rubble in a room where, in the previous weeks, he had placed in a cupboard some images of his patron, St Filippo Neri, which “se exparcieron alrededor de mi y de vajo de mi caveza” in what was almost a military-style defensive formation. Among the favours granted by St Filippo Neri, Orsini emphasised the fact that the

70. Pasquale Palmieri, “I miracoli fra scienza e storia. Il sangue di san Gennaro, la Sindone e altre reliquie”, *Storica*, 23/67-68 (2017), pp. 193-219.

71. AGS, *Secretarías Provinciales*, leg. 56, s.f. *Relación de los daños que ha ocasionado en la Ciudad y Reyno de Napoles el terremoto el dia 5 de Junio de 1688*.

72. Monica Azzolini, “Coping with Catastrophe: St Filippo Neri as Patron Saint of Earthquakes”, *Quaderni storici*, 3 (2017), pp. 727-750.

most important documentation of the archbishopric had remained intact. To smooth the path of the Benevento authorities in restoring the correct functioning of the administration in the post-disaster period, the “sancto a conservado todas las escripturas que en algun modo pertenecian a la razon y gobierno”.⁷³

Over the course of the early modern period, some of the earthquake reports enjoyed an unprecedented circulation by the passage through the printing press. As mentioned, earthquakes were the subject of a literary genre that continued to garner ever-greater market shares over the course of the decades. The interest of the public was fuelled by a production of texts made possible only by the spread of printing, although manuscripts continued to play a fundamental role in the transmission of concepts and ideas.⁷⁴ With titles accompanied by attributes such as *vere* and *pietose*, many accounts of earthquakes became literal bestsellers. In the 17th century in particular, the change in scientific approaches and the consolidation of the Baroque vision gave a different status to this type of printed product, generally made up of just a few pages.⁷⁵

Sometimes the administration of the Hispanic Monarchy closest to the epicentre even transmitted such accounts to the court of Madrid. In the summer of 1627, a prolonged earthquake swarm caused destruction and panic in the province of Capitanata, in the Kingdom of Naples. For months, the inhabitants of the various cities were constrained to camp out in the surrounding fields, since almost all the houses and buildings in the area had collapsed or were uninhabitable. The Capitanata earthquake was the subject of many printed publications that were then sold in the most important squares all over Italian peninsula and Europe. The *Vera relatione del pietoso caso*, published in Naples by Giovanni Orlandi, was a representative example of this literary genre, and the title assured the reader that the text was based on “relationi, come si giudica, autentiche, e vere”.⁷⁶ The astute choice of the adjectives in the title responded primarily

73. AGS, *Secretarías Provinciales*, leg. 56, s.f. *Relación de los daños*.

74. Mario Infelise, *Prima dei giornali. Alle origini della pubblica informazione*, Rome, Laterza, 2002.

75. Brendan Dooley, “News and Doubt in Early Modern Culture: Or, Are We Having a Public Sphere Yet?”, in *The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Brendan Dooley and Sabrina Alcorn Baron, London-New York, Routledge, 2001, pp. 275-290.

76. *Vera relatione del pietoso caso successo nelle terre contenute della Provincia di Puglia, Regno di Napoli, cioè del terremoto sentito in questo presente anno 1627. Cavata*

to a commercial strategy: the alleged testimony from the epicentre undoubtedly made the text more appetising to the public of the time.⁷⁷ It is, however, extremely likely that contemporary readers considered the information contained in such works to be true. The viceregal secretariat of Naples, for instance, translated Orlandi's publication into Castilian, which circulated in manuscript form under the title *Verdadera Relaçion* in the official circuits of the Habsburg administration, where in theory only reliable information was transmitted.⁷⁸ In both the original and the Spanish translation, the account recorded the miraculous appearance of Our Lady in the sky above Lucera – one of the places worst struck by the quake – mitigating divine anger: “stava una nube bianca, e grande, dentro della quale era una donna vestita di bianco [...] che sia vero, ò no non sta à me affermarlo”. However, during the tremors, a local hermit who was prostrate before an image of the Virgin Mary heard “più volte una voce, che diceva figlio agiuto”.⁷⁹

In any case, the intervention of a saint or of Our Lady could save not only a worthy person such as Cardinal Orsini in 1688, but also a community. In 1694, the Palazzo della Vicaria in Naples, which was the most important law court in the kingdom, suffered severe structural damage, and the powerful tremors caused several parts of the building to collapse.⁸⁰ The Vicaria, which was located at Castel Capuano, managed one of the most crowded prisons in the city, but not a single inmate was killed because, according to a petition sent to Viceroy Santisteban, the inmates had been protected by the Madonna del Carmine (Our Lady of Mount Carmel).⁸¹

da relationi, come si giudica, autentiche, e vere, pubblicata per Gio. Orlandi Stampatore alla Pietà, Naples, nella Stampa di Egidio Longo, 1627.

77. Domenico Cecere, Chiara De Caprio, “Stratégies de communication et plans de reconstruction après le tremblement de terre de 1783 de Calabre”, in *Une histoire du sensible: la perception des victimes de catastrophe du XII^e au XVIII^e siècle*, ed. by Thomas Labbé and Gerrit Jasper Schenk, Turnhout, Brepols, 2018, pp. 221-241.

78. AHN, *Universidades*, Libro 1156, ff. 208r-211v. *Verdadera Relaçion del lastimoso caso successo en la Proviñcia de la Pulla en el Reyno de Napoles del terremoto que se ha oydo en este presente año de 1627.*

79. *Vera relatione del pietoso caso.*

80. Carla Pedicino, “El Sacro Regio Consejo Napolitano entre historiografía y fuentes (Siglos XV-XVI)”, *Cultura Latinoamericana*, 30/2 (2019), pp. 240-267.

81. ASN, *Segreterie dei Viceré, Scritture diverse*, vol. 908, s.f. Petition of the inmates of the Vicaria, Naples (18 September 1694). On Our Lady of Mount Carmel in early modern Naples, see: Peter Burke, “The Virgin of the Carmine and the Revolt of Masaniello”, *Past & Present*, 99/1 (1983), pp. 3-21.

In addition to the numerous victims and the practically total destruction of the region caused by the Lima earthquake of 1687, the disaster also exacerbated the tension between the viceroy, Duke of Palata, and the archbishop of the city, Melchor Liñán y Cisneros. In the years immediately following, the political controversy became the hot topic in the correspondence sent from Peru to Madrid. In the first reconstruction of the earthquake, the Duke of Palata already sowed the seed of doubt about the capacities of the eminent prelate, who had been unable to assist in the aid operations on account of his well-known health problems, “en la ocasión que mas les havia menester”.⁸² Months later, in one of the letters most critical of the archbishop’s conduct, the viceroy confirmed to Charles II that the situation in the capital was still desolate and that the survivors lived with a strong sense of guilt, almost every one of them swearing that he had been saved because his own “Angel de su guarda le sacó como de la mano para librarle de la sepultura que le estavan formando las paredes de sus casas”.⁸³

Finally, a last case that took place on the Mediterranean frontier, the testing ground of early modern Europe:⁸⁴ a year after the defeat by the Ottoman fleet in the naval battle off the shores of Preveza in 1538, the court of Charles V received disturbing news about an earthquake that had destroyed the fortress of Bona, now Annaba, on the Maghreb coast. The port had been occupied by the imperial forces following the famous conquest of Tunis, and the government of the city was entrusted to the captain, Alvar Gómez, known as Zagal. The life of this military commander reads like the screenplay of an adventure film, and he eventually died in Africa of wounds he himself had inflicted in a desperate attempt at suicide following accusations of corruption and authoritarianism.⁸⁵

Within the space of a few years, the stronghold of Bona had, in effect, been abandoned to its fate, given that its strategic importance in the war against the Ottoman Empire was effectively zero, incomparable to that

82. AGI, *Lima*, 87, no. 27. Duke of Palata to Charles II, Lima (8 December 1687).

83. *Ibid.*, Duke of Palata to Charles II, Lima (20 May 1688).

84. Emilio Sola Castaño, *Los que van y vienen. Informaciones y fronteras en el Mediterráneo clásico del siglo XVI*, Alcalá de Henares, Universidad de Alcalá-Servicio de Publicaciones, 2005.

85. Simone Lombardo, “Un romanzo della frontiera mediterranea. Il caso di Bona e di Alvar Gómez (1535-1540)”, *Tiempos Modernos. Revista electrónica de Historia Moderna*, 39/2 (2019), pp. 1-27.

of La Goulette or Oran. The string of garrisons along the frontier with Islam had to address a dire situation of constant hardships: the wages and victuals always arrived late, and the relations with the local people were generally hostile. In a context that was already harsh in itself, the situation of Bona became unbearable when the walls of the fortress were destroyed by an earthquake.⁸⁶ The quake hit the Maghreb seaport with violence on 15 February 1539. Four days later, Zagal wrote a first letter to Don Francisco de los Cobos, the influential secretary of the emperor, informing him of the damage caused by the earthquake: “la torre del homenaje todo por el suelo hasta los cimientos”.⁸⁷ The news was communicated personally to the court by Zagal’s right-hand man, Bautista Constantino. The herald confirmed the grievous damage to the walls produced by the tremors, which, moreover, had caused over 100 deaths. The messenger’s report also made a first mention of the miraculous deliverance of the captain, who “escapo milagrosamente de manera que todo se perdio excepto dos tigres”.⁸⁸

The increasingly insistent criticisms of Zagal’s behaviour drove the emperor to order the magistrate Miguel Vaquer to make an official visit to the Bona garrison.⁸⁹ As a result, the news of the earthquake was extensively documented, despite the episode having taken place in the early decades of the 16th century, a period for which the traces of natural disasters are extremely scarce, at least in the central archives of the Hispanic Monarchy.⁹⁰ According to the version that was accepted even by the emperor, Don Alvar had escaped death by a miracle, considering that his residence had almost entirely collapsed. In a letter to Charles V dated 28 February, Zagal reconstructed the episode in detail: God had spared his life because in the previous months the captain had directed his efforts at the conversion –

86. Gennaro Varriale, “Se li mandassimo in Africa? Un progetto di colonizzazione per i greco-albanesi di Napoli (XVI secolo)”, in *La terra ai forestieri*, ed. by Giampaolo Salice, Pisa, Pacini Editore, 2019, pp. 81-100.

87. AGS, *Estado*, leg. 464, s.f. Alvar Gómez to Francisco de los Cobos, Bona (19 February 1538).

88. *Ibid.*, leg. 467, f. 75. Summary of the dispatches sent by Alvar Gómez (from 28 February to 14 April 1538).

89. *Ibid.*, leg. 1114, f. 81 Miguel de Vaquer to Charles V, Palermo (22 December 1540).

90. Gaia Bruno, “Fronteggiare l’emergenza: le reazioni delle istituzioni del Regno di Napoli di fronte ai sismi del XVII secolo”, *Mediterranea. Ricerche Storiche*, 51 (2021), pp. 115-146.

rather ambiguous, from our standpoint – of thirteen Muslim women who lived in his residence. Alvar Gómez compared the girls, who were very probably slaves, to angels who – thanks to divine clemency – escaped with him through the rubble “syn rescibir ningun daño de nuestras personas que todo lo demas que avia en mi casa se perdio y murio”.⁹¹

5. Conclusion

Over the course of the early modern period, in the Habsburg administration, rivers of ink were consumed in addressing the correlation between the devastation caused by earthquakes and the wrath of God. Despite historiographical interpretations built based on the black legend and 19th-century nationalism, the Hispanic Monarchy was not *sic et simpliciter* the homeland of archaism, but the planetary configuration of the seismic risk of its domains made this an essential benchmark in the coeval interpretation of telluric activity. Not incidentally, some of the most authoritative and widespread works on earthquakes were published in the Habsburg cities. As mentioned, the episteme of the time was constructed on heterogeneous bases, including Greco-Roman tradition, biblical exegesis, the principles of astrology and the pragmatism characteristic of the *conquistadores*, which were rendered incompatible only with the Enlightenment review of reality in the second half of the 18th century.⁹²

On 23 December 1586, Santiago de Guatemala suffered another earthquake that razed to the ground over eighty houses and killed dozens of people. The political situation in the Caribbean region was uncertain after the capture of the island of Santo Domingo by Francis Drake. The concerned city *cabildo* averted Philip II of the real risk of an English incursion into his territory, which was now defenceless following the destruction of the defensive infrastructures in the earthquake. Regarding the disaster itself, the information coming from Guatemala as a dominion accustomed to such tremors gravitated essentially around two points: the plea for tax exemptions and the divine origin of the catastrophe, “fue Nuestro Señor

91. AGS, *Estado*, leg. 464, s.f. Alvar Gómez to Charles V, Bona (28 February 1538).

92. On the concept of episteme, see: Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1966.

servido de se acordar de nosotros”.⁹³ To demonstrate to the Almighty the sincerity of their contrition, the Catholics hoped for the intercession of Our Lady or of a saint to act as mediator between the divine plan and earthly remorse, since the mortal origins of both the Virgin and saints then made more sense of human failings. To supplicate God’s mercy, the local institutions of the Hispanic Monarchy, together with the ecclesiastical authorities, organised processions in which relics and sacred images were carried. In the collective mindset of the time, imploration of Our Lady or of a saint was an essential part of the solution to the problem.⁹⁴ In areas of constant telluric activity, such as the Philippines, some earthquakes were even named after the saint of the day. The earthquake of St Andrew in 1645 was one of the most devastating that the archipelago suffered in the early modern period. The Cathedral of Manila, the other churches and most of the buildings suffered incalculable damage, and the victims numbered hundreds. Almost a year later, the Franciscans in the Philippines informed Philip IV that “el día de San Andres temblo la tierra en estas yslas con tanto vigor que se vinieron al suelo casi todos los edificios de la ciudad”.⁹⁵

Given the moral and religious implications, earthquakes were one of the worst nightmares for the community, especially in places of intense seismic activity. There was also another characteristic of the tremors that accentuated the fears of contemporaries: the unpredictability. After the most destructive earthquakes, the communities that had been struck passed the memory down to younger generations so that the tragic event became a key episode in the history of the territory. In the months following the Lima earthquake of 1687, the viceroy ordered the notary Diego Fernández Montano, lieutenant of the *cabildo*, to gather together all the testimonies and information about the damage suffered by the city so that it should never be forgotten “para los venideros siglos”.⁹⁶ In areas such as Peru that

93. AGI, *Guatemala*, 41, no. 70. Cabildo of Santiago de Guatemala to Philip II (6 May 1587).

94. Pasquale Palmieri, “Protecting the Faithful City: Disasters and the Cult of the Saints (Naples, 1573-1587)”, in *Disaster Narratives in Early Modern Naples: Politics, Communication and Culture*, ed. by Domenico Cecere, Chiara De Caprio, Lorenza Gianfrancesco and Pasquale Palmieri, Rome, Viella, 2018, pp. 207-220.

95. AGI, *Filipinas*, 81, no. 10. Definitors of the Franciscans to Philip IV, Manila (4 August 1646).

96. AGI, *Lima*, 87, no. 42. Report of Diego Fernández Montano, Lima (5 August 1688).

were accustomed to the quakes, over time the people actually acquired the ability to assess the impact of the telluric activity. In the months prior to the earthquake of 1687, the Archbishop of Lima sent a letter to the Duke of Palata that, to us at least, would appear to have something of the prophetic. The archbishop described the divine anger that had been unleashed against Peru on account of the viceroy's interference in the local church: the entire region seemed to be hostage to pirate raids and a smallpox epidemic. Finally, Don Melchor Liñán y Cisneros stressed the exceptional and powerful earthquake swarm that had, since the spring, been torturing the territory of Peru with "temblores, que aunque tan comunes en este Reyno, [...] han sido de los ynsolitos, por aver descargado alli Dios la espada de su justicia con muerte de mas de mil personas".⁹⁷

Sometimes a past disaster was recalled in the administrative documentation as a precedent to bolster the claims of the present, such as requests for tax breaks. The impact of the earthquakes on the collective imagination fostered the favourable outcome of the requests submitted to the court. Contemporaries were aware of this, to the point that some of the reports of earthquakes submitted were indeed what would now be called "fake news", excogitated to obtain an advantage. On 13 April 1595, King Philip II accepted the petition made by Alcoy: for the next ten years, the municipality could collect all the proceeds from the mills. As a result of the sovereign's concession, the city was able to erect a new monastery on the site where a tabernacle of the Holy Sepulchre already stood. According to the petitioners, popular devotion to the tabernacle had begun after an act of sacrilege had caused a couple of very strong quakes.⁹⁸ According to the document transmitted to the Council of Aragon, in January 1571 – that is, over twenty years earlier – a Frenchman named Juan Prats stole the hosts and the sacred objects from the church while it was empty, whereupon suddenly "se oyó un espantoso terremoto". Despite God's first warning, the foreigner made off with the booty undeterred, while "se oyó otro terremoto saliendo de la iglesia". Three days later, the desecrator was tracked down by one of the citizens, who, inspired by the Almighty, found the gold and silver objects in the Frenchman's stables. Having been smoked out, Juan Prats was duly executed in the public square, but in his house "se fundò una

97. AGI, *Lima*, 86, s.f. Melchor de Liñán y Cisneros to the Duke of Palata, Lima (10 May 1687).

98. Santonja Cardona, *Iglesia y sociedad*, p. 461.

capilla so invocacion del Santo Sepulchro”, which became the foundation of the future monastery.⁹⁹

The story presented to His Majesty by the inhabitants of Alcoy was the antithesis of the evidence of dozens of survivors referring the intervention of Our Lady or a saint in favour of the victims. Juan Prats, on the contrary, had all the traits of the antihero: sacrilege, and a foreigner to boot. However extravagant it may seem to us, the anecdote of the fake quakes nevertheless hit the target. Philip II supported the construction of a monastery around the miraculous chapel, which was erected, moreover, in a territory where seismic activity was sadly recurrent.

99. ACA, *Consejo de Aragón*, leg. 697, no. 69. *Sobre la merced: porque supplica la villa de Alcoy*, Madrid (13 April 1595).

