

# ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

in

## PREMODERN EURASIAN and MEDITERRANEAN NARRATIVES

*Themed Section*



guest-edited by

Chiara FONTANA and Ines PETA

## Contents

CHIARA FONTANA and INES PETA	
Acknowledgements.....	5
CHIARA FONTANA and INES PETA	
Introduction.....	7
ANDREA PIRAS	
Environmental Ghosts and Omens in Ancient Iran: Between Care for Life and Apocalyptic Terrors.....	13
NAHID NOROZI	
Drought, Famine and Prosperity: The Slaying of the Dragon and the Legitimation of Iranian Kingship in Persian Epics (Fifth/Eleventh to Eighth/Fourteenth Centuries).....	25
ABDESSAMAD BELHAJ	
Discussions of Drought in Premodern <i>Ḥadīth</i> Collections: Islamic Ethics and Attitudes to the Causes of and Responses to Natural Disasters.....	39
INES PETA	
Divine Trials and Political Authority: Droughts and Plagues in al-Ṭabarī's <i>Tārīkh</i> .....	51
MARCO DEMICHELIS	
The Mythological Control of The River Nile: A Study on the Islamic Sources.....	69
MASSIMILIANO BORRONI	
Climate as Catalyst: The Role of a Cold Snap in the Mosul Revolt of 259/873–4 .....	89

Contents

EMMANUEL PISANI  
Sobriety (*zuhd*) and Hunger (*jūʿ*): Ethical Responses to Natural Disasters  
in al-Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) Theology of Creation ..... 107

CHIARA FONTANA  
Scorpions on the Cheek, Stars in the Gaze: Astrology, Power, and Poetic  
Imagination in the Late Abbasid World ..... 125

MUHAMMED OMAR and NAHYAN FANCY  
Mamluk *Maqāmas* on the Black Death ..... 151

ILARIA CICOLA  
How to (Try to) Tame a Disaster? Annotating Approaches to the Integration  
of Politics and Power Strategies into the Creation of a Disasters Database in  
Classical Arabic Sources ..... 183

JAVIER ALBARRÁN  
Natural Disasters and Political Catastrophes: Entangled Feelings and Landscapes  
in al-Andalus and Beyond ..... 207

Notes on Contributors ..... 237

## Introduction

This special issue gathers the papers presented at the international conference ‘Environmental Challenges in Premodern Eurasian and Mediterranean Narratives’, held at the Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna, Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures (LILEC), on 14 and 15 January 2025. The conference was convened under the EU-funded project ‘NextGenerationEU—PRIN 2022: Environmental Anomalies & Political Legitimacy in Global Eurasia, 12th–14th Century’, a research initiative resulting from an inter-university collaboration between the Università degli Studi di Napoli L’Orientale (National PI: Antonella Guida), the Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna (Local PI: Ines Peta), and the Università della Calabria (Local PI: Luca Parisoli).

The conference explored how attitudes towards environmental challenges, natural disasters and calamities were affected by contextual factors related to the socio-political scenario, ideological trajectories or religious beliefs, and, in turn, how the tragic occurrence of such events influenced ideological orientations, theological interpretations and political legitimacies. By addressing these dynamics, it sought to shed light on the complex interplay between environmental perception and authority, both divine and temporal, across pre-modern Eurasia and the Mediterranean world, with particular reference to the Persian and Arab regions.

Historical, religious and literary sources from these regions often portray environmental phenomena as omens of divine election or punishment, apocalyptic signs, moral trials or political instruments through which legitimacy could be reaffirmed, negotiated or contested. Within the Arabic and Persian sources, such reflections appear particularly in *ḥadīth* compendia, historical chronicles and ethical treatises, but also in epic works and poetry, from which it is possible to discern the moral, theological and political meanings attributed to disasters. Droughts, famines, floods, earthquakes, epidemics and other catastrophes, as well as specific astronomical phenomena or anomalous climatic changes, are depicted in these texts as signs of divine favour or wrath, omens of military victories or defeats, and occasions calling for reform, repentance or renewal.

Despite the fact that natural disasters have attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent years, prompted both by contemporary climate change and the global experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, many questions remain unanswered, and several aspects still await systematic investigation. Certain types of catastrophes—such as earthquakes and epidemics—have been the focus of much research (DOLS 1977; CONRAD 1982; STEARNS 2011; AKASOY 2007 and 2009; DUCÈNE 2024), while others have received comparatively little attention. Likewise, specific regions and historical periods, particularly Egypt and Syria at the time of the Black Death (WIET 1962; DOLS 1977; BORSCH 2005), have been more

thoroughly studied than others. Moreover, most existing studies have adopted a primarily historical approach, aiming to reconstruct the plague's origin and spread and to assess its economic or demographic consequences (DOLS 1977 and 1981, BENEDICTOW 2021). Less attention, however, has been paid to the ways in which disasters were interpreted, especially to the interplay between religious understandings, political imperatives and the broader social context—how these perspectives shaped each other, how they were mobilised to support or contest authority, how they were influenced by other religious or political traditions, and how they could foster inclusion and solidarity within an interconfessional *umma*, or, conversely, reinforce exclusion and otherness.

Building on these considerations, this special issue investigates the interpretation of natural disasters from an explicitly interdisciplinary perspective, combining historical, religious, literary and philological approaches to illuminate the complex ways in which pre-modern societies perceived, understood and responded to environmental anomalies. While its chronological focus is on the pre-modern period, the ultimate goal is to provide a comparative and interdisciplinary platform to explore how environmental phenomena were conceptualised and narrated across different temporal and cultural horizons, fostering a dialogue between classical and modern hermeneutical systems and reconsidering their endurance, transformation and limitations.

## Overview of the Contributions

The issue opens with two contributions that frame the *longue durée* of environmental imaginaries in the Persian cultural sphere. Andrea Piras examines how ancient Iranian traditions, particularly Zoroastrian religious writings, interpreted environmental anomalies as expressions of cosmic and moral imbalance, thus laying the mythological and religious groundwork for later political readings of natural disorder. These events were understood within the context of a dualistic struggle between Ahura Mazdā, the supreme god, and Ahriman, the destructive spirit, and were therefore interpreted as omens or signs, reflecting the ongoing cosmic struggle between life and death, good and evil, shaping both religious and societal responses to ecological and historical crises.

Nahid Norozi continues this Iranian focus by exploring medieval Persian epics dating to between the fifth/eleventh and eighth/fourteenth centuries, showing how the killing of the dragon by a king or a king's champion symbolises the restoration of the cosmic and social order which has been disrupted by calamity and famine. Dragons are depicted as obstructing vital resources such as rivers, fertility or treasure, and their defeat by the ruler or his champion serves to legitimise kingship, linking good governance with the prosperity of the land and the flourishing of the people. These narratives, rooted in Indo-Iranian myth and Zoroastrian symbolism, thus frame the king's moral and political authority as inseparable from his ability to protect both natural and societal life.

The following cluster of studies turns to the Islamic and Arabic sources of the Abbasid and post-Abbasid periods. Abdessamad Belhaj opens this section with a survey of *ḥadīths* on drought and famine, showing how early Islamic traditions framed such phenomena in moral and eschatological terms. Drawing primarily on Sunni *ḥadīth* compilations, Belhaj demonstrates that drought was interpreted as the consequence of greed, injustice and the

denial of religious truth. The responses to natural disaster found in these texts emphasise the efficacy of prayer, repentance, humility, charity and the intercession of charismatic religious figures, particularly the Prophet and his lineage, and underscore the limits of political power while linking legitimate governance to moral and spiritual virtue.

Ines Peta continues along this line by analysing how Abbasid historiography—and al-Ṭabarī's (d. 311/923) *Tārīkh al-rusūl wa-l-mulūk* in particular—frames drought and epidemic as moral trials that test the righteousness of both the community and its rulers. Drawing on a wide range of accounts reported by al-Ṭabarī, Peta shows that such catastrophes are depicted not merely as divine punishments but as complex moral and political instruments, occasions to exercise piety, wisdom and ethical judgement, and as mechanisms through which authority could be legitimised, contested or reshaped in accordance with divine will. In this way, she demonstrates how al-Ṭabarī offers a precise model of ethical and responsible leadership within a broader moral, theological and political framework, one with which subsequent Islamic authors continued to engage when interpreting calamity.

Marco Demichelis stays on the theme of drought but shifts the focus to Egypt and the Nile, exploring Arabic sources from the fourth/tenth to the eighth/fourteenth centuries. He demonstrates how periods in which the River Nile experienced low flood levels during the annual inundation were deeply entangled with political, social and mythological narratives. Drawing on chronicles, geographical treatises and literary sources, he illustrates how low inundation levels were read both as a reflection of local mismanagement and as a signal of the potential influence of distant powers, particularly the rulers of Ethiopia, over the river. He traces the emergence of narratives linking fluctuations in the Nile floods to Egyptian famines under the Ikshīdīd and Fatimid dynasties, highlighting how chroniclers like al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1441) framed environmental crises within political and dynastic instability. At the same time, Demichelis considers the transmission of older mythological and apocalyptic traditions, showing how control over the Nile's waters operated simultaneously as a practical, political and symbolic marker of authority, divine favour and legitimacy.

Massimiliano Borroni turns to Iraq to analyse a rare episode of extreme cold recorded in Mosul in 259/873–4, showing how climate perceptions intersected with narratives of social unrest and rebellion. Drawing especially on al-Azdī's (d. 334/945–6) local perspective, Borroni shows that the exceptional frost destroying trees, fruits, wheat and barley was directly linked to the fiscal injustice of the Abbasid administration, whose officials demanded tax payments on lost crops. In this way, Borroni reveals how environmental stress could act as a political catalyst, transforming climatic hardship into collective resistance and, ultimately, institutional reform, exemplified by al-Mu'taḍid's (r. 279–89/892–902) later decision to realign the fiscal calendar with the agricultural cycle.

The contribution by Emmanuel Pisani shifts from the socio-political and historiographical dimensions of disaster to its theological and spiritual interpretation. Focusing on al-Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) ethical thought, Pisani examines how calamities such as plague, drought and famine are integrated into a broader theology of divine justice and moral purification, where these events are considered components of a divinely ordered cosmos—the best of all possible worlds—through which God educates and tests humanity. While such catastrophes occupy only a limited space in the *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, Pisani shows that they are spiritually

assimilated within an eschatological vision of time and a moral pedagogy grounded in ascetic practice, characterised by renunciation, self-discipline and spiritual sobriety.

With Chiara Fontana, the focus shifts to astrology and its multifaceted role in late Abbasid literature, highlighting a perspective that combines rhetorical, aesthetic and intellectual dimensions. Fontana shows how poets and thinkers appropriated astrological imagery not merely as a predictive science but as a medium for negotiating power, human agency and poetic craft. In the wake of illustrious predecessors like al-Buḥturī (d. 284/897) and Ibn al-Muʿtazz (d. 296/908), later poets like al-Arajānī (d. 544/1139) and al-ʿAntarī (d. 570/1175) employed celestial motifs to critique political authority, explore human limitation or ornament love and satire, while philosophers and theologians—including Ibn Sīnā (d. 427/1037) and al-Bīrūnī (d. 440/1048)—mediated astrology’s symbolic potential within doctrinal constraints. Across the *longue durée* of Abbasid poetry and prose, astrology was thus transformed into a language of irony, aesthetic refinement, and rhetorical sophistication: a literary instrument through which cosmic order, fragility and desire were imaginatively articulated.

Page | 10

Remaining on a literary and intellectual plane, Omar and Fancy analyse the *maqāmāt* genre to explore the representation of epidemics and other disasters. They demonstrate how authors such as Ibn al-Wardī (d. 749/1349), al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363), and Ibn Nubāta (d. 768/1366) employ narrative, allegory and rhetorical elaboration to depict the social, moral and theological dimensions of calamity. Through detailed descriptions of human suffering, societal disruption and divine justice, these writers transform disasters into occasions for ethical reflection and spiritual contemplation, while highlighting the imaginative and stylistic potential of the *maqāma*. Omar and Fancy further trace how later Mamluk chroniclers, including al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1441) and Ibn Taghrībirdī (d. 874/1470), appropriated these literary depictions to construct historiographical accounts of epidemics such as the Black Death, revealing the intersections between literature, theology and historical memory.

Turning to a broader methodological reflection, Ilaria Cicola focuses on how to construct and analyse a corpus of disaster narratives contained in pre-modern Arabic sources, bridging philological precision and digital tools. More precisely, she describes the challenges connected to the Disasters Corpus in Classical Arabic Sources (DiCCAS), the digital corpus she is developing within the Alma Mater Studiorum—Università di Bologna as part of the PRIN 2022 project, using the TEI (Text Encoding Initiative) markup language. The corpus includes the Qurʾān, the canonical *ḥadīth* collections *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, al-Ṭabarī’s *Tārīkh* and *Tafsīr*, Ibn Taghrībirdī’s *Kitāb al-Nujūm al-zāhira*, al-Maqrīzī’s *al-Sulūk*, al-Dhahabī’s (d. 748/1348) *Tārīkh al-Islām al-kabīr*, the *Rasāʾil* of al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/868) and *al-Mudhish* of Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201). Cicola reflects on the methodological decisions involved in selecting, encoding and analysing passages, highlighting how digital tools can complement traditional philological approaches to facilitate comparative analysis of disasters across textual genres.

Finally, Javier Albarrán offers a rich exploration of the relationships between natural disasters and socio-political events in the Andalusī and Maghribī worlds, situating them within a wider Mediterranean pattern that includes Eastern Islamic and Christian traditions, thus closing the issue with a cross-cultural dialogue on the politics of environmental meaning. In particular, his study shows how processes of territorial loss are represented in historical sources through references to natural disasters, whether real or imagined. The analysis

highlights two interrelated narrative landscapes: a *landscape of fear*, populated by images of devastation, trembling earth and divine wrath, and a *landscape of consolation*, in which the memory of al-Andalus is reimagined through paradisiacal gardens, flowing waters, past victories and cultural excellence. These landscapes function as mechanisms for articulating trauma, asserting communal identity, and offering moral and emotional guidance, while also establishing connections across Mediterranean Islamic and Christian traditions. Through this approach, Albarrán reveals how the medieval imagination processed disaster, encoding collective memory and moral reflection into emotionally charged narratives that spatially and rhetorically map fear, loss and consolation.

In conclusion, the contributions gathered in this special issue collectively demonstrate the richness and complexity of pre-modern societies' engagement with environmental anomalies. They show that disasters were deeply intertwined with moral, theological, political and literary frameworks, shaping communal identities, ethical norms and collective memory. By combining philological, historical, literary and religious approaches, the issue highlights both the methodological challenges and the innovative opportunities offered by interdisciplinary research, revealing how classical sources can be reinterpreted and compared in light of contemporary analytical tools. Moreover, the cross-cultural and transregional perspectives presented here underscore the importance of situating local experiences of calamity within broader Mediterranean and Eurasian patterns contexts, showing how interpretations of environmental events were shaped and exchanged across different times, places and religious traditions. Ultimately, this special issue invites further reflection on how narratives of disaster function as instruments of moral, social and political discourse, offering a lens through which to understand both the past and its enduring influence on the interpretation of natural and human-induced crises.

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