

Article

On Floods and Earthquakes: Iberian Political and Religious Readings of Natural Disasters (1530–1531)

Marta Albalá Pelegrín 

English and Modern Languages, College of Letters, Arts, and Social Sciences, Cal Poly Pomona,
Pomona, CA 91768, USA; martaa@cpp.edu

Abstract

This article explores the ways in which writing about natural disasters conveyed a fraught sense of instability and ever-changing political alliances in the early sixteenth century. It centers on a broadsheet comprising two letters and a song sent to a Castilian statesman, the Marquis of Tarifa, from the papal curia and the court of Portugal. The two letters, one by Baltasar del Río and another by an anonymous informant, reveal that disasters could be potentially seen as moments of political action. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the papal curia suffered several floods, the plague, factional violence, and internal divisions with long-lasting consequences. In turn, Lisbon, was hit by a major earthquake, which impacted major structures. These letters allow us to reconstruct how the concept of curiosity and that of an untamable nature came together to make sense of natural disasters, such as floods and earthquakes. I analyze the ways in which Iberian agents negotiated the supposedly natural or divine character of these events in order to advance political and religious calls for action.

Keywords: floods; earthquakes (1530–1531); political and religious readings

1. Introduction

Rain hit Rome in October of 1530. As had been the case on previous occasions, the currents first overflow the banks of the river. On 7 October, the waters arrived at Tor di Nona, and the next day the Roman streets became water canals. On 9 October, the city was flooded, and some of its magnificent houses near the Tiber were swallowed by the untamable waters (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiir). A few months later, “on 26 January 1531, between 4 and 5 a.m., a strong [earthquake] occurred in Lisbon and along the Tagus margins. The shock heavily struck downtown and neighboring areas, causing approximately 1000 casualties. It was preceded by at least one foreshock, probably around 7 January 1531” and by a tsunami (Baptista et al. 2014, p. 2150; see also Justo and Salwa 1998). In the eyes of the Iberian agents residing in Rome and Lisbon, the world seemed to crumble.

In 1531, a printshop in Burgos hastened to put together a broadsheet that featured a description of these natural catastrophes.¹ The brief compilation, entitled *Traslado de dos cartas*, contained two separate letters describing the calamities or whips (“açotes”) which had struck the two cities only a few months apart.² Weaving together the two accounts were a title page and a song. While the title page provided a brief description of the events, the song demanded that all Christians “get rid of” any “damned sect” (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biiv). *Traslado* understood both catastrophes as divine and frightful signs (“temerosas señales,” Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, air). While Rome’s overflowing waters



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might have reminded readers and listeners of widely circulating prophecies of a global flood, the Lisbon earthquake perhaps evoked for many the tremors that had accompanied the death of Christ (Matthew 27, 51 and ff.), as well as the earthquake prophesized for the end of times in the *Book of Revelation* (16,18) (Schenk 2010, p. 29). The letters shared the same addressee, the Marqués de Tarifa, Fadrique Enríquez de Rivera (1476–1539), a statesman and a writer well connected with key enclaves of Iberian political action. Their content informed Castilian audiences of how agents based in Iberian diplomatic hubs, such as Rome, and Lisbon perceived the flood and the earthquake. Little is known about their circulation in Burgos and how the broadsheet was sold and distributed, or how it traveled to other Castilian towns. It is very likely that its news spread quickly, and its content was read or listened to by people of all socio-cultural backgrounds. Some of its materials, and especially its final song, might have been composed with a wider dissemination in mind. As *cantastorie* sung prophetic verse pamphlets in Rome, street singers and amateurs could have raised their voice in Burgos and other Castilian cities to read the news and put the song's lyrics to music.

The *Traslado* offered the curious readers up-to-date information and a way to cope with catastrophe while also providing them with a prophetic and politico-religious interpretation of the events. Historians have used its contents, amalgamated with other sources, to reconstruct the effects of the 1531 Lisbon earthquake (Justo and Salwa 1998, p. 320).³ However, the matter of this broadsheet was not unique, as it formed part of an abundant body of literature on natural catastrophes and political propaganda with apocalyptic undertones, produced in a period when crises and adverse events were frequently interpreted in eschatological terms (Cunningham and Grell 2000, pp. 1–17). To put it otherwise, these letters belonged to a vast array of early modern cheap prints on natural disasters presented as divine signs circulating in Europe.⁴ Their consumption was especially frequent in what is now France, Germany, Spain, and central and northern Italy. As Ottavia Niccoli has noted, the success of these pieces (whether in epistolary or verse form) relied on the plurality of readings they allowed and their transversality and reach across social classes, given that their circulation had grown together exponentially thanks to the involvement of the printing shops. They became an important element “in the formation of public opinion, particularly in periods of crisis, and their use was quite consciously contrasted with other modes of furthering political ends” (Niccoli 1990, p. 59). Indeed, news on natural disasters enticed the curiosity of readers and presented an opportunity for printers and agents to use that curiosity to propagate politico-religious ideas.

This paper will center on how the descriptions of the 1530 Rome flood and the 1531 Lisbon earthquake connected a variety of disciplines, including natural sciences such as meteorology, with political propaganda and prophecy in pocketable literary products designed to be consumed by an ample readership, connecting key enclaves of political action.⁵ I will argue that the readers' curiosity could become a nest for a plurality of scientific and prophetic political readings.

2. On Monsters, Portents, Prodigies, and Marvels

By the turn of the sixteenth century, a vocabulary to describe and make sense of things whose explanation went beyond the ordinary had emerged. Scientists, tricksters, and humanists coexisted in a world plagued by monsters, prodigies, portents, and marvels. Some of these monsters were made of flesh, while others were the product of human machinations, fears, and shortcomings. Prodigies, broadly understood, dealt with the wonders of nature in all its might and fright. Perceived monsters, prodigies, and portents were often instrumentalized to predict what was about to happen, or what could happen if people failed to take action. The echoes of this terminology reached far and wide. One could

read or hear about prodigies and monsters in books of ceremonies, sermons, broadsheets, street performances, and private and public correspondence, so much so that some of them became common talk in inns and public squares. The printshop that put together the *Traslado* made use of this vocabulary in its title page. The flood was “frightful,” the earthquake “frightful and strange,” and the signs of the earthquake had provoked “fright” and “wonder” (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, air).

In Rome, where the first letter of the *Traslado* originated, monsters and prodigies had long been interrelated concepts. For instance, the index of a manuscript book of ceremonies recording Leo X’s papacy enticed the reader with accounts of “monsters” and “prodigies” recently seen in different places, conflating the two notions.⁶ One of them was the flood of 1514, also called a “portendus” in another manuscript composed at the Roman curia.⁷ The destruction caused then by the overflowing waters of the Tiber was placed under the umbrella category “De monstis,” which encapsulated prodigious events and “monsters” (fabricated, imagined, or real).⁸ The flood belonged together with other prodigious events: the three suns seen in the sky in France, the eerie sound of a bell that tolled in Catalonia without anyone playing it, or the apparition of the Virgin.⁹ Among them were also still-born or born babies, such as the so-called monster of Bologna, the Roman serpent-boy, the dog-boy, and so on.¹⁰ Many of them had been the talk of the town in the Northern Italian Peninsula in 1513 and 1514, interpreted in the context of the Italian Wars as signs of unrest and divine forewarning.

This lexicon of prodigy, wonder, marvel, and monstrosity permeated accounts of floods and earthquakes both in Rome and in the Iberian Peninsula. The prolific writer Giuliano Dati penned a poem on the famous flood of 1495, the most devastating before that of 1530, calling it a deluge (*diluvio*). *Del diluvio de Roma del MCCCCXCV a dì IIII de decembre* was published as a broadsheet in Rome and Florence. It promised to deal with the deluge “and other marvelous things” (“Et daltre cose di gran marauiglia”). Dati’s “marvelous deluge” was sung on Roman streets by performers and *cantabanchi*, who sold hundreds of copies to listeners.¹¹ The image of Rome covered by the waters was also visually projected onto a woodcut on its titlepage. It displayed a couple of half-submerged inhabitants swimming in despair against the currents, while another roamed the city on an improvised boat.¹²

The 1495 flood also made headlines in a series of rumors turned into pamphlets. Among other marvels, it recounted the vision of a Tiber monster that further conflated the flood with monstrosity. North of the Alps, the Lutheran reformer Philip Melanchthon reconceptualized a representation of the monster as a “Papal Ass” in a polemical anti-Catholic pamphlet published in 1523, which used a modified version of a woodcut representing the monster carved in the workshop of Lucas Cranach the Elder. As had happened in Rome, the flood was once again interpreted as a divine sign but with a different political reading. For Melanchthon, the calamities that occurred in Rome were a clear proof of the corruption of the Roman Church, and the Tiber monster incarnated the pope himself. However, twenty years later, when this image made it to the lavishly illustrated manuscript *The Book of Miracles*, produced in Augsburg, any mention of the pope had vanished.¹³ Even if some readers could still recall the association, the free imperial city, directly under the command of the emperor, sought to prevent religious turmoil and anti-Catholic agitation (Waterman 2022, pp. 28–39).

The term “deluge” (“diluio”) also appeared in the title page of the 1531 *Traslado*. Considering that none of the two letters used that word in their text, this choice constituted a selling strategy most likely devised in the printer’s shop.

In short, natural catastrophes, such as floods and earthquakes, could be defined through early modern terms as monsters, *prodigia*, marvels, and wonders (Barnett 2019,

p. 25). As Neil Kenny has pointed out, terms such as “wonder,” “marvel,” “strangeness,” and their multiple cognates in Romance and Germanic languages were intrinsically linked to the later development of 17th-century curiosity in all its complexity (Kenny 1998, pp. 14–15). Although the concept of curiosity had not yet become mainstream and lacked the connotations it would assume a century later, the consumption of meteorological novelties presented as strange transformed them into curious objects suitable for curious people.

3. The Roman Flood of 1530

The first letter of the *Traslado*, containing a firsthand narration of the calamities that occurred during the flood of Rome, was penned by Baltasar del Río on 20 October 1530. Del Río was a learned curial, Bishop of Scala, and papal master of ceremonies. He was a writer and advocate of the republic of letters who used his position at the curia to promote the arts in his hometown, Seville, as well as to communicate precise news (Albalá Pelegrín 2021, pp. 8–13). Some of Del Río’s readers might have recognized his name as linked to the literary joust and the confraternity that he founded in Seville. In the letter sent to Fadrique Enríquez de Ribera, information flowed through private and public channels from Rome to Castile. Baltasar del Río knew Enríquez de Rivera personally. He had been his longtime friend and informant, and he accompanied him in 1519 during his stay in Rome. In the letter, Del Río made sure to leave a trace of the Marquis’s visit to the papal city. Enríquez de Rivera himself had written an account of his trip to the Italian Peninsula and Jerusalem.¹⁴

In Del Río’s letter, Rome became another Venice. Unlike the Serenissima, untamed water canals covered its buildings, not leaving a single stone visible to the human eyes. According to the account of a contemporary Frenchman, Piazza Navona, where the Church of San Giacomo degli Spagnoli stood, was completely flooded.¹⁵ The high waters halted communication opportunities in the adjacent market and one of the centers of news exchange for individuals who maintained close ties with the Spanish faction. The description of Rome as another Venice, with boats navigating its waters, coincidentally recalled the earlier metaphor of the *cavallo venetiano* in the initial woodcut of Francisco Delicado’s *La Lozana andaluza*, which predates the flood of 1530 and has been read in the tradition of the “ship of fools” or *Narrenschiff*. In the woodcut, the character of Lozana flees from Rome on a boat bound to Venice (Delicado 1950). This was an impossible route unless one circumnavigated the Italian Peninsula or imagined the Northern Italian peninsula along with Rome submerged in water. A completely flooded landscape, in which Lozana could navigate from Rome to Venice, was not far from the imagination of some of Delicado’s and Del Río’s contemporaries. Since the end of the fifteenth century, predictions of a universal flood that would take place in 1524 circulated across all social spheres, instilling what Ottavia Niccoli has described as a case of “collective panic” (Barnett 2019, pp. 29–30; Niccoli 1990, pp. 140–44). Believed by some and derided by others, the supposed 1524 flood had become such a commonplace that in 1521 Machiavelli included it in a “listing of banal topics of conversation” for tavern benches (Niccoli 1990, p. 142).

The opening of Del Río’s letter resorted to a rhetoric of fear, recalling the author’s poor mental and physical state after the catastrophe.

I don’t even know where or how to start—first, because the magnitude of the frightfulness of what I am about to tell has distraught me, so I cannot make sense of what I say, since fear has taken upon me in this place (. . .) I have such trembling hands that I cannot write, and I cannot make enough sense of this to make someone else write it.¹⁶

The first words of the letter conveyed a sense of immediacy. Del Río, still suffering from the consequences of the flood, wrote with trembling hands as an eyewitness of the

natural disaster. The overflowing river had carried animals away, the currents' strength had destroyed houses, and left corpses floating. City structures had been affected, among them cardinal palaces. It had also left a terrible burden for those who had survived. The price of grain had quadrupled, complained the humanist Giovan Battista Sanga in a letter to Alessandro de' Medici, leaving citizens in a dearth of staple foods. The cattle and the wine (old and new) was mostly lost (Gasparoni 1865, p. 21).

As the waters reached Paulo Biondo's house in Sant Simeon, where Baltasar del Río was living at the time, he rode to take refuge to the hill of Monte Cavallo (the Quirinal), where the Cardinal of Osma, the Dominican García de Loaysa (1479–1546), had gone to find some leisure ("holgando"). The Spaniards whose houses suffered through the inundation also found relief in the cardinal's hospitality. Around a thousand Spanish men and five hundred Spanish women had survived by sheltering in García de Loaysa's residence in Campo de' Fiori. They were well fed in the cardinal's house, where they "were provided from his pantry in such a way that no one missed their own house, nor their horses and mules (*caualgaduras*)."¹⁷ Many had not sent [their servants] to the market to procure something to eat, instead busying themselves in preparing their houses for the flood, closing doors and windows to no avail.¹⁸ The amount of detail given to Loaysa's actions clearly shows that Del Río's letter aimed to lavish praise on the Spanish Community in Rome and on one of its most distinguished members residing in 1530. García de Loaysa was among those closest to Emperor Charles V, addressing letters to the emperor from Rome between 1530 and 1532.¹⁹ One of the Spanish curials who found shelter in Loaysa's house was the Valencian judge of the tribunal of the *Sacra Romana Rota*, Luis Gómez, who in 1531 penned an exhaustive Latin treatise on the Roman flood, dedicated to García de Loaysa (Gómez 1531, aiir).²⁰

The letter also gave a minute account of the movements of the Pope and other members of the curia. Clement VII had survived the flood. He was in the port city of Ostia with a group of cardinals and the imperial ambassador, Miquel Mai, when the Tiber started to overflow.²¹ On the advice of a local, the Medici Pope and those who were with him left Ostia to take shelter in the Quirinal, in the old house of St. Agatha, which had belonged to Leo X when he was a cardinal (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiiiv). Others, less fortunate, had perished, such as the apostolic secretary Misser Eusebio, whose house had sunk with nineteen persons inside (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiir).

Baltasar del Río's words allow us to peek into how curial Iberian elites understood, digested, and politically (re)used natural disasters, and the tensions that arose from scientific and politico-religious interpretations. The description of the flood in Rome started with a scientific observation and ended with a (divine) warning, beginning as a natural catastrophe whose consequences could have been prevented and winding-up as God's punishment. This double reading was not unusual and can be found in other contemporary broadsheets with prophetic overtones.

First, Del Río pointed out how the more recent architects and city planners had ignored the habit of ancient Romans, who avoided building near the river. Contemporaries blatantly disregarded past floodings, erecting palaces adjacent to the riverbanks. People had "trusted water as a friend," unlike the Venetians who, having long lived surrounded by it, see it as an enemy (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, air). In addition, many houses were built on top of sand or earth filled with dung which, unlike solid rock, was unstable in the face of river currents (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiir). Holes had also been dug all over the city to accommodate a great number of cellars (*cantinas*).

[Those cellars] flake the houses underneath when they are filled with water: and since the water filled the sewers, the pipes and the gutters, the cellars were

flooded before the water was seen on the streets: and when the water was emptied (...) the houses fell little by little or altogether.²²

Del Río's comments on the exploitation of earth and the careless planning of modern constructions occupy the first few pages of the letter. Human decisions and actions were (mostly) to blame for the loss of lives. Del Río's notes predated a letter sent in 1560 by the architect M. Antonio Trevisi to Pope Pius IV, proposing a series of measures to prevent future floods (Gasparoni 1865, p. 27). The letter's focus on human intervention can be put in dialogue with modern notions of the Anthropocene. Indeed, an overflowing Tiber was not alien to Rome. High water from previous floods had been inscribed on city walls since antiquity and could be easily perused by citizens and travelers in marble markers. Del Río took pains to record previous floods.²³ The most frightful one in living memory was the one that happened during Alexander VI's papacy, in 1495, and yet it only reached up to one meter below the new mark of 1530 (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiiv). Contemporaries agreed that the 1495 flood had been "nothing" compared with that of 1530.²⁴ Given the dimensions of the calamity, Del Río further wondered about its impact on the city's livelihood and whether it would provoke a multiplication of disease and would be followed by a plague, as had happened in the time of Pelagius (r. 556–561).²⁵

Besides describing how the flood affected the Spanish community and other dignitaries, the letter also reinterpreted the natural disaster in a politico-religious key. It situated the Spanish faction in Rome and its agents and curials, present and past, as essential to secure the wellbeing of Christendom whether in the Italian or the Iberian Peninsula. Del Río signals how St. Gregory, the successor to Pope Pelagius I, entrusted his *Moralia in Job* ("sus morales") to the bishop of Seville, St. Leander, who "ordered that many and highly devoted processions were performed to placate the wrath of God" (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiii v).²⁶ As a procession was taking place in the vicinity of the Old St. Peter's Basilica, an angel appeared on the top of the mausoleum of Hadrian sheathing his sword. It was thanks to St. Leander's initiative, we are told, together with the Pope's prayers and the intercession of the Virgin Mary, that the apparition took place. The Pope and those surrounding him came then to realize that God had liberated them from his wrath. From that day on, the Mausoleum became known as Castel Sant'Angelo and processions were celebrated yearly to commemorate the miracle on the day of St. Mark (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiii v).²⁷

The flood that occurred during the papacy of Pelagius I connected past religious conflicts with contemporary Christian and Iberian affairs. The "waves" caused by the Arian "heresy" were like the "ones now caused by Luther" (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiiiiv). Those latest waves promoted the rapid expansion of Lutheranism among notables from territories in dispute within the Spanish Monarchy. As such, Del Río compares the conversion of the Duke of Saxe-Lauenburg, Magnus I (1470–1543), to Lutheranism, to that of the Visigoth King Leovigild to Arianism. The letter closes with some advice on how to proceed next with the Lutheran heresy and expects the emperor to show a firm hand on these matters while informing Castilian notables, in a condemning tone, of the confessional tolerance that prevails in imperial territories. The call to the emperor in its last lines, together with the miraculous story of St. Leander, aimed at convincing readers and listeners of the necessity of an intervention by Charles V, not only as the emperor but also, especially, as king of Spain ("España") (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, bir). It also tried to monitor the emperor's actions. In the Imperial Diet of 12 November 1530, Charles V had invested Magnus with the title of Duke of Saxe-Lauenburg. A few months later, Magnus introduced the Reformation in his duchy and became a Lutheran.²⁸

When ten years before Charles V had sent to Rome a letter condemning Lutheranism, which was read at the college of cardinals on 10 May 1521, Del Río had rushed to the

printing press to publish a laudatory broadsheet. The publication recorded a gathering that had taken place in the house of Cardinal of Santa Croce, Bernardino de Carvajal, with the objective of commending Charles V's decision. The pamphlet, with a preface by Del Río, encouraged the emperor in his fight against Lutheranism and the Ottoman empire (Albalá Pelegrín 2021, p. 15).

The politico-religious closing of Del Río's letter, and its call for action, was not at all unusual. It followed a tradition of broadsheets that weaponized monsters and natural catastrophes against Lutheranism (Niccoli 1990, p. 121). Yet, in doing so, Del Río appealed directly to the emperor and aimed at highlighting the importance of the Spanish faction in Rome. It was thanks to the intercession of García de Loaysa, he stated, that about a thousand and five hundred men and women had been protected. It had been St. Leander's processions that had pleased God together with the prayers of the Pope. It was Charles V as King of Spain, rather than as Emperor, who needed to interfere in the affairs of Saxony. To further understand Baltasar del Río's intervention, and his insistence in providing a reading of the flood that would both inform and benefit the Spanish community in Rome, his letter needs to be put in dialogue with several other politico-religious interpretations that circulated at the curia.²⁹ For example, the *Diluvio di Roma che fu a VII d'ottobre l'anno M.D.XXX*, described the catastrophe as another sack, linking its destructive effects with those caused by the imperial troops in 1527, thus casting a less flattering perspective on Spanish intervention in Rome. The *Diluvio* circulated mainly beyond Rome. It was first printed in Bologna in November of 1530 (Gasparoni 1865, p. 3) and later reprinted in Venice (Gasparoni 1865, p. 8). Giovan Batista Sanga used the same metaphor to describe the 1530 flood as a sack in a letter to Alessandro de Medici (Gasparoni 1865, p. 21). Its destruction recalled for some contemporary readers the sack of Rome by the Colonna (1526) and for many others the one by the imperial troops (1527).

4. The Lisbon Earthquake of 1531

An anonymous letter, following the one penned by Del Río in the *Traslado*, informed Fadrique Enríquez de Rivera of the tremors in Lisbon, the "most frightful earthquake ever seen." In the early morning of Thursday, January 26, "it seemed as if the sky and the earth moved close together." On the same day, the earth trembled three times. The earthquake ravaged numerous houses, resulting in the loss of countless lives.³⁰ The tremors shattered numerous structures, among them several ecclesiastical buildings, such as the Church of Nossa Senhora da Escada, the Ribeira palace, and the Church of S. João de Praça. Statues fell to the ground in the monastery of Belem. Both the monastery and Belem's defensive tower suffered structural damage, but neither of them collapsed. Other buildings, including the Carmo monastery and the Lisbon Cathedral, suffered only minor damage.

As described by the Portuguese poet and royal secretary Garcia de Resende, the fear of death lay deep roots in the population. Many left their houses and farms, sleeping in the streets and open fields, filled with the fear of what could happen next:

Out of fear, everyone left
their houses and their occupations.
They slept in the countryside
and in public squares,
in tents or in houses made of branches.
Wary and fearful, they
stayed up most nights,
since the tremors didn't cease.

The people, bewildered,
seemed to be waiting for their death
(de Resende 1917, p. 104)³¹

Many royal palaces had been heavily damaged. The chambers of Queen Catherine of Austria (Charles V's sister) and those of the princess and Prince Henrique (1512–1580) crumbled, as did an orchard atop the house of Francisco de Velázquez, the Queen's wardrobe keeper. According to the anonymous informant, the earthquake killed some Castilians working for the Queen. The “rua dos hornos” sunk. Out of fear, no one dared to mention the plague (“pestilencia”) (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biv), as earthquakes were often interpreted as apocalyptic signs heralding the disease (Smoller 2000, pp. 163–66). Many people in the royal quarters and beyond wore their day clothes at night, so that if another tremor were felt they could get out. For ease of exit, the King and the Queen decided to lay down in a chamber near a courtyard. The Valencian Doña Juana de Acuña had survived miraculously when all of her house, except for her chamber, had crumbled killing four women in her retinue. Conversely, the neighborhood where the ambassador of Castile, Lope Hurtado de Mendoza, resided had only a few cracked walls.³² Similarly to Baltasar del Río's letter on the Roman flood, the one on the Lisbon earthquake informed about the whereabouts of the royal family and of individuals connected to the Spanish faction in Lisbon and nearby towns.

Outside of Lisbon, the damage had been paramount. For instance, a “quintana” where Prince Henrique and Prince Duarte, Duke of Guimarães (1515–1540) were staying cracked open (“se abriu,” Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biv) one and a half leagues from the parish of Lavradio. In Tancos, the princess and her ladies escaped in their underwear through the windows when the residence of the prince fell. In Setubal, the *Casa del Mar* and the house of the Marquis and of his son cracked open (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biiv). Houses bordering the riverbanks in Santarem had been leveled to the ground, preventing the monarchs to go there. Almeirin had suffered a similarly ill fortune. It was said that in Vila Franca forty houses sunk, burying thirty people. In A Castanheira, the casualties amounted to sixty and in Azambuja no house stood up after the quake. As the narration progressed, the apocalyptic undertones became more evident. A town fountain poured blood instead of water, while ships reached the sky (in what was later described as a tsunami). The Tagus River split in two halves and sailors peeked through the deeps of the earth. They saw the sky open: “it seemed like a fiery oven, and (...) a large ray with a huge flame (...) fell in Vila Franca” (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biir).³³ In Alcáçovas the earth split in two, spitting such quantity of water that people thought they would drown. An eerie sound accompanied the earthquake, with bells tolling as loudly as can be imagined and no one ringing them. Like the trembling hands of Baltasar del Río that guided the reading of the flood in Rome, here sound aimed at capturing the readers' curious minds and to transport them into the scene of the earthquake. The last page of the letter makes clear that the author intended these “marvelous” sights to be understood as divine signs. Once the earthquake was over, the King visited a monastery in Azeitão (“Azeyton”) to entrust himself to God. “The Queen, the princess and the princess heir left on their own, without their retinues” (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biiv).³⁴ The Castilian ambassador Lope Hurtado de Mendoza made a pilgrimage to the church of Santo António.

In 1531, news of the earthquake also made it to Augsburg, where a broadsheet was published under the title *Wunderbarliche geschicht anzeygung, so newlich in Portugal vnnd sonnderlich zu Lisebona geschehen sind*.³⁵ It described a series of (divine) signs that had preceded the tremors. Among them were the sight of a huge whale in the coast of Portugal on January 18, followed by blood raining from the skies and fire falling from the heavens (S.n. 1531b, ai). The whale sighting depicted in the title page of the broadsheet was later

reconceptualized in an eerie gouache illustration in *The Book of Miracles* (Borchert and Waterman 2022, p. 208).

The traveling of the news about calamities in the Italian and Iberian Peninsulas and in free imperial cities such as Augsburg shows the movement of information between diplomatic agents and centers of cultural production, between imperial and mercantile networks. Individuals in diverse geopolitical territories, linked in one way or another to Spanish and Habsburg imperial or royal networks, engaged in the production and consumption of accounts about these catastrophes in different formats: in broadsheets, as a form of street spectacle, or as rumors they listened to or carried out as part of their daily errands. By the sixteenth century, attention to local natural disasters became keener, and their impact was often understood in relation to global calamities. As Barnett has claimed, local floods garnered increased attention, even though “earthquakes, plagues, comets, famines and various forms of extreme weather had long been interpreted as signs of God’s wrath and human sinfulness” (Barnett 2019, p. 28). Calamities carved themselves into the social, religious, and political conflict that brought the Reformation and the Counterreformation. Both Catholics and Protestants instrumentalized these disasters, analyzing them as divine signs, and often blaming each other (Fulton 2012, pp. 54–74). Like conquests, disasters—either natural or unnatural and God-sent, and often the two things at the same time, as it was the case in Del Río’s account—worked hand in hand with the mobilization of political factions. And their recollection in writing created areas of shared “interest.”

As people feared for their own death in a flooded Rome or a destroyed Lisbon, political actors tried to seize the moment to surveil what they might have deemed as radical religious ideas, animating readers and audiences to police even within kinship ranks. A case in point is Baltasar del Río’s attempt at influencing Charles V so that he should not bestow privileges on imperial territories. Unlike Castile, some of them enjoyed confessional freedom, as was the case with free imperial cities. Some Iberian political circles advocated eliminating religious difference. However, even within the most recalcitrant groups, individuals such as Baltasar del Río, himself a converso, had made a career thanks to the different regulations and the lack of power of the Castilian Inquisition in Rome. Although the path for standardization into a universal Christian Church was not seen in a similar fashion in Rome and Castile, for the readers these differences were erased and put aside in favor of a unitarian vision of an Iberian Christian stronghold that needed to defend its “identity” against other forms of government in imperial (perceived as somehow Iberian) enclaves.

Garcia de Resende’s *Miscelânea* presented a similar interpretation of a Christian (and Iberian) universalism.³⁶ The *Miscelânea* recorded signs of the perceived malaise of an era. In it, as in the *Traslado*, the 1530 Roman flood and the 1531 Lisbon earthquake were analyzed in contiguous stanzas. Resende minutely recorded the frightfulness that the events had instilled in the population, as well as the pilgrimages, processions, and religious celebrations devoted to placating these divine warnings. The seamless association of the flood and the earthquake in the *Miscelânea* further shows that, in the mind of some Iberian contemporaries, the Roman flood and the Lisbon earthquake were inextricably linked and perceived as contiguous realities affecting Iberian subjects, regardless of whether Resende had access to the *Traslado* when writing his *Miscelânea* or not.

5. Singing Disaster

The closing song (*canción*) of the *Traslado* spelled out in clear terms the connection between the two “divine signals,” while taking a blunt stand in religious polemics. In its stanzas, the use of language—including consonant rhyme and repeated lines—served as a

mnemonic device for singers, listeners, and readers alike. Aiming to instill fear, the lyrics offered a rudimentary politico-religious interpretation of the events while addressing the audience directly. By employing the first-person plural (*nosotros*) command form, the text conveys a sense of urgency and fosters a collective identity among readers. The first stanza instrumentalized the flood and the earthquake, urging people to act and take control of their own destinies:

Let's get rid of heresy
and worship Jesus Christ
so that we can live
without fear of the ravages He sends us³⁷

The lyrics exhorted Christians to unite and actively eradicate any “heretical” group. The second stanza encouraged them to spread their faith throughout the world to avert God’s wrath, ending with the same final line as the first stanza:

Let's praise our Faith
and expand it through the world.
Let's burn and destroy
any damaging sect.
Let's all join forces
to destroy heresy,
so that we can live
without fear of the ravages He sends us³⁸

By turning both the flood and the earthquake into manifestations of God’s punishment, the song capitalized on the potential fear that catastrophes provoked. Heresies were left in plural (to accommodate any act that could be deemed as such, anywhere in any given moment), thus making its message more powerful and frightful than Del Río’s direct attack on imperial decisions about subjects converted to Lutheranism. Moreover, in the third and final stanza, the song called for a single-faith world—a universal Christian Church in which Christians would erase any other religion as the only possibility for their survival:

For these tremors here [Lisbon]
and the floods in Rome
come to us because we don't tame
the damages coming from here and there,
and so this is clear to us:
in order for all to be safe
let's get rid of heresy.³⁹

In a haunting circle, the final line of the last stanza mirrored the first, binding the song in an endless loop that echoed the call to uproot heresy, as if each repetition dug deeper, making it possible to re-sing the song *ad infinitum*.

Though capitalizing on disaster was (and remains today) a recurrent phenomenon, examining these early accounts of natural disasters allows us to see that catastrophe, marvel, and curiosity were often inextricably linked. The narration of those calamities, and their publication in the Iberian Peninsula, created a community of readers across different centers of political influence, while making sure of providing a specifically “Iberian” interpretation of the events, different from readings originating in other places, spaces, and cultural circles. The eradication of heresy was seen as something that happened not only outside of

Castile, where the letters originated, but also within Iberian territories. The insistence of the final song on monitoring behaviors both in Iberia and beyond aligned with the Iberian factions featured in the *Traslado*. For example, Garcia de Loaysa and many Mendozas (there included Lope Hurtado de Mendoza) had sided with the imperial troops and against the Comuneros. The fear among certain Iberian factions of any form of political or religious divergence, including Lutherans and *alumbrados*, seemed to justify a call to unity against any “deviant” thought. As Niccoli has noted, prophetic language permitted a fully fleshed-out interpretation that “could be used not only to express a generic concern for a traumatic situation (...) but also (...) to formulate a quite specific political analysis or to organize a line of propaganda” (Niccoli 1990, p. 59). Curiosity was also a powerful tool of propaganda (Benedict 2001, p. 4). Political actors used their channels of information and intelligence to try to stop political movements on the ground. Significantly, readers’ and listeners’ curiosity about natural disasters provided fertile ground to act.

6. Conclusions

The devastation wrought by both calamities instilled fear among people and left diplomatic agents attentive to who had perished and how frightful and out of the ordinary the events had been. The *Traslado* exploited the curiosity of people in key enclaves of Iberian and Imperial political action. In Rome, Lisbon, Burgos, and Augsburg, readings about these events could be strikingly different, but their instrumentalization followed similar paths, always accommodated to the agenda of their writers.

Even letters addressed to the same readers presented divergences. Layers of meaning kept accumulating on top of one another between the poet and the printer via the incorporation of a title page, a summary, and lyrical materials, all of which introduced new connotations. Authorship and style also differed. Readers could interpret the letters as complementary. While the account of the Roman flood was signed and accommodated historical, scientific, and prophetic readings, the letter describing the earthquake was unsigned and provided a tabloid-like summary of the events, with a pronounced interest in the calamity’s prophetic signs. Curiosity was manifold. Some readers, especially those interested in political affairs, could be on the lookout for political and diplomatic news conveyed by the agents and statesmen who had originally written and received the letters. First, it was important to determine who had survived, the whereabouts and condition of the representatives from allied powers, how opposing factions had been affected, and, lastly, who would need to be replaced. Second, it was also critical to describe a sensorial experience of the event so that the reader could be imbued with wonder. Third, these letters allowed writers to cultivate a sense of community among readers (and listeners) through what can be described as affective catastrophic bonding: as readers, they did not suffer the events, but through their description they could (re)imagine them and feel themselves implicated in the shared emotional aftermath. Lastly, the letters laid the groundwork for an analysis of pressing political and religious matters, such as the rise of Protestantism, the imperial ambitions of neighboring Islamic states, and the political movements of the emperor. Incorporating these texts into the broader history of early modern curiosity allows us to reconstruct the manifold ways in which natural catastrophes and politico-religious readings shaped Iberian thought during this period.

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Notes

- ¹ The *Traslado de dos cartas* is preserved at the Hispanic Society of America (HSA). I would like to thank John O'Neill and Vanessa Pintado for their assistance in securing a copy of the *Traslado*.
- ² The complete title of the broadsheet reads: *Traslado de dos cartas que embiaron al marqués de Tarifa. Una que embio de Roma el muy reuere()do y magnifico señor don Baltasar del Rio: obispo de Escala: maestro de cerimonias de nuestro muy santo padre: en que le recuenta mas por entero todo lo que enel espantoso diluuio de Roma acaescio./Y la otra que le embiaron de Portugal: en que haze() relacio() del muy espa()toso y extraño terremoto: y temerosas señales d() gra() admiracio(): que fue y se vieron en la mar: y en la tierra*. Another edition of the letter about Lisbon's earthquake circulated separately with a different title page. A copy of it is now held at the BNE in a volume containing *relaciones* that once belonged to Pascual de Gayangos. This edition of the letter also contains the song at the end. *Traslado de una carta que de Portugal embiaron al Muy Ilustre Señor el Marqués de Tarifa que le hacen relacion del muy espantoso y extraño terremoto y temerosas señales de gran admiracion que fue y se vieron en la mar y en la tierra jueves a veynte y seis de Enero deste año de treinta y uno*, R/11907(1). (S.n. 1531a)
- ³ Henriques et al. put together an exhaustive compilation of Portuguese historical sources for the 1531 earthquake. (Henriques et al. 1988).
- ⁴ Pieper refers to early letters similar to the *Traslado*—which conveyed news on a variety of topics during the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century—as “cartas de nuevas” (Pieper 2005), while Bulgarelli classifies some of these letters, along with other materials, as “avvisi a stampa.” The *Traslado de dos cartas* does not figure in Bulgarelli's catalogue of early letters (Bulgarelli 1967). Early news pieces and (early and current) journalism “is a special kind of literary product whose real text is the collectivity at large” (Dooley 1990, p. 485). For an analysis of seventeenth-century accounts of catastrophes and their connection to the diffusion of news, see Gennaro Schiano's work (Schiano 2021).
- ⁵ Meteorology constituted a popular genre of natural philosophy from the thirteenth century onward. It encompassed the subjects included in Aristotle's *Meteorologica*, that is, “the state of the planet's surface, interior, and atmosphere, its weather and climate, and the periodic disruptions and disasters to which it was subject, including hail, comets, earthquakes, and floods” (Barnett 2019, p. 24). Alongside meteorology, other scientific genres—such as the *cronologías*—were also popularized in the Ibero-American world, combining astrological and cosmographical knowledge.
- ⁶ “De Monstris. Monstra & prodigia qua hoc tempore uisa sunt diuersis in locis” Vatican Library (hereafter BAV), Barb. Lat. 2683, f. 42v.
- ⁷ BAV, Barb. Lat. 2683, and f.113r.; BAV, Vat. Lat. 3351, f. 133v.
- ⁸ On the category of monsters as linked to bodily malformations, see Ottavia Niccoli's work (Niccoli 1990, pp. 30–60).
- ⁹ BAV, Barb. Lat. 2683, f.88v–f.89r.
- ¹⁰ The so-called monster of Bologna was a girl named Maria who only lived a few days. Her two heads and two mouths were interpreted in a myriad of ways, and predominantly as a sign of ominous times, connected to the Italian Wars (Niccoli 1990, pp. 51–55).
- ¹¹ Giuliano Dati specialized in rendering news, chronicles, legends, and saints' lives into vernacular poetry (Niccoli 1990, pp. 14–15).
- ¹² Philine Helas has described the remarkable interplay of image and text in Giuliano Dati's 1495 broadsheet of the Roman flood, and has also provided reconstructed map of the 1495 flood (Helas 2017).
- ¹³ *The Book of Miracles* contains depictions of miraculous signs and catastrophic events since the times of the Old Testament up to its completion (ca. 1560) along with a vision of an apocalyptic future. Its production has been traced to Augsburg area. (ca. 1560) and a preview into an apocalyptic future. Its production has been traced to the Augsburg area. See Borchert and Waterman (2022).
- ¹⁴ Enríquez de Rivera's pilgrimage account remained in manuscript form until it was printed in Lisbon in 1608 under the title *Este libro es de el viaje que hize a Ierusalem de todas las cosas que en el me pasaron desde que sali de mi casa de Bornos, miercoles 24 de noviembre de 1518 hasta 20 de octubre de 1520 que entre en Sevilla*, Lisbon, 1608. The account of his pilgrimage was printed after the journey, together with Juan del Encina's *Viaje de Jerusalem*. Rivera's account—published alongside that of Juan del Encina, who had accompanied him as part of his retinue to Jerusalem—offers a wealth of information on the political configuration of the Italian states. Rivera had a humanist education, and was an avid collector of books and art. During his stay in the Italian Peninsula, he acquired books, maps, and musical instruments, commissioned translations, and collected coins, statues, and astrological devices (Lazure 2012, pp. 93–94).
- ¹⁵ BAV, Barb. Lat 3552, f. 51v.
- ¹⁶ “Ni se por do comience a escreuir ni como, lo vno porq(ue) la gra(n)deza d(e)l espa(n)to de lo q(ue) he de d(e)zir me tiene turbado: que no sepa lo q(ue) me digo: y lo otro porq(ue) el miedo q(ue) avn aca puesto en mo(n)te Cavallo te(n)go: da tal te(m)blor a la mano: que juro por dios que no puedo dela mia escreuir: ni se lo q(ue) me diga para escreuir con agena.” (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiv).

- 17 “a los quales de su despe(n)sa se proueyo en tal manera q(ue) ninguno sentio menos su casa, ni a sus caualgaduras falto nada dello” (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiir).
- 18 “porq(ue) a vn esse dia no embiaro(n) a co(m)prar de comer los mas: vnos por hazer baluartes a sus cantinas: otros a sus puertas: otros a sus casas” (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiir).
- 19 García de Loaysa had paramount political influence in matters of state. As noted by the Venetian ambassador Gasparo Contarini in 1525, Loaysa was not only Charles V’s confessor, but was also present every time that wars, councils, benefices, or any other matters of state were discussed. Loaysa held the titles of president of the Council of the Indies (1524) and member of the Council of State (1526) and would become Grand Inquisitor in 1546. Notably, Loaysa sided with the imperial forces in the Comunero Revolt and was instrumental in convincing the emperor to go to Bologna to be crowned emperor by Pope Clement VII in February 1530. Shortly afterwards, in March 1530, he was made cardinal of Santa Susana. Nieva Ocampo has argued that Loaysa’s influence over Charles V might have been in decline by 1530. Nevertheless, Loaysa resided in Rome from 1530 to 1532, and his letters to the emperor—preserved in the Archive of Simancas and transcribed by W. Heine—offer valuable insight into this period. In a letter dated 8 October 1530, coinciding with the heavy rains that would provoke the flooding of the Tiber, Loaysa expressed concern over the defiance and persistence of the Lutherans in their beliefs. He argued that the only effective solution was force, drawing a parallel to the Comuneros Revolt, where according to him, leniency had led to wasted time and no results until military action was taken. Loaysa concluded that a similar firm approach was needed. (Nieva Ocampo 2015, pp. 652–53, 661; Barrado Barquilla n.d; Heine 1848, pp. 41–42).
- 20 Luis Gómez’s treatise has recently been translated into English and is described by its editors as ‘the first systematic treatise on the Flood and the first Latin treatise on the topic’ (Bariviera et al. 2023, p. 12). This fine and valuable translation includes several related texts in the appendix; however, Baltasar del Río’s letter is not among them. This article seeks to highlight Del Río’s overlooked contribution and bring renewed attention to this significant yet underexamined source.
- 21 For a biographical note on Miquel Mai see (Bellolell Martínez 2019, pp. 42–57).
- 22 “las de poco tie(m)po aca se labran debaxo de tierra descama(n) las casas por debaxo quando se hinchén de agua: y como por las cloacas, cañas, y husillos d(e)la tierra se hallaro(n) llenas las ca(n)tinas: antes q(ue) el agua se viesse por las calles: assi como se yua(n) las aguas delas ca(n)tinas vazia(n)do y co(n)sumie(n)do por los mismos lugares: se yua(n) avn va(n) las casas caye(n)do poco a poco y mucho a mucho” (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiir).
- 23 Del Río engaged with the legacy of past Roman floods through surviving texts and the physical traces embedded in the cityscape. Some floods had been memorialized by writers, including those that occurred during the times of Hadrian I and pope Pelagius. Others remained visible through marble inscriptions scattered across the city, particularly those that took place during the papacies of Martin V, Sixtus IV, Alexander VI, Julius II, and Leo X. (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiir–aiiiv).
- 24 See note 15 above.
- 25 “Algu(n)os escriptores leemos q(ue) en tiempo de Pelagio a quie(n) sucedio señor sant Gregorio primo: fue tan gra(n)de la inu(n)dacio(n) y auenida deste rio q(ue) crecio sobre las almenas de Roma: y que traya tales y ta(n) gra(n)des y malos animales muertos que qua(n)do el rio torno a su madre: se quedaro(n) por los ca(m)pos y tales q(ue) de su hedor se inficiono el ayre y sucedio tras ello ta(n) gra(n) pestilencia q(ue) el mismo papa Pelagio murio della: y en solo estornuda(n)do las p(er)sonas caya(n) muertas por las calles: por lo qual dizen q(ue) de alli quedo qua(n)do algu(n)o estornuda dezirle luego Dios te ayude” (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiir–v).
- 26 “y hizo hazer muchas y muy deuotas processiones p(ar)a aplacar aquella tan gra(n)de yra de nuestro señor” (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiir v).
- 27 According to Del Río, the angel appeared atop the Castel Sant’Angelo (“la gran mole o sepultura de nuestro Adriano”) on the day of St. Mark (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, aiir v).
- 28 Given the dates of the Duke of Saxe-Lauenburg’s investment and conversion, it is very likely that Del Río’s letter was completed and sent in early 1531.
- 29 For documentation about the flood, see (Gasparoni 1865).
- 30 The 1531 earthquake destroyed 1500 houses in Lisbon. Most of the heavily damaged houses were located near the river “in new, unconsolidated landfills” (Baptista et al. 2014, p. 2150).
- 31 “Todos cõ medo q(ue) auĩam/deixaram casas, fazendas;/nos campos, plaças dormiã,/em tẽdilhões, y em tendas,/casas de ramas faziam;/has mais das noctes velando,/temendo, & receando;/porq(ue) tremor nõ cessaua:/ha gente pasmada andaua/com medo, morte esperãdo” (de Resende 1917, p. 104).
- 32 On 24 March, Lope Hurtado de Mendoza, the Castilian ambassador in Portugal, wrote from the town of Palmela to inform the Spanish monarch, Charles V, of the latest news then circulating. His letter included updates on the upcoming papal council, as well as mention of the earthquake that had struck Lisbon nearly two months earlier. Mendoza noted that the Lisbon earthquake—and the aftershocks that continued to be felt—had left people in Portugal deeply fearful. Driven by that fear, many began to claim that “the Jews who remain in this land have brought about the wrath of God. In Lisbon, Old Christians took up arms to slit the throats of New Christians”. Mendoza reports—cautiously, and emphasizing the need for secrecy—that the King of Portugal

has ordered an Inquisition and has already removed many New Christians from their positions. Mendoza adds that if the King of Portugal carries this out effectively, he will likely accumulate a great fortune, as many of the New Christians are extremely wealthy. (Viaud 2001, pp. 442–43).

- 33 In the Spanish original, “en este mismo derecho viero(n) abrirse el cielo: y que parecía como vn horno ence(n)dido: y vieron salir de alli vn gra(n) rayo co(n) vna grande llama de fuego: y fue a caer a villa fra(n)ca” (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biir).
- 34 “La reyna y la infanta: y la princesa salieron sin ninguna gente” (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biiv).
- 35 The extant copy of the broadsheet, *Wunderbarliche geschicht anzeygung, so newlich in Portugal vnnd sonnderlich zu Lisebona geschehen sind*, is now preserved in Munich at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Rar. 271, Beibd.2.
- 36 While describing news of conquest, the *Miscelânea* praised the Portuguese royal family and their kin. It chronicled the lives of the notables of the kingdom, and both enemies and allies abroad. It reported on fratricidal Christian wars, the expansion of Islam and of Lutheranism.
- 37 “Vaya fuera la eregia/a Jesu Christo adoremos/porque sin temor estemos/destos açotes que envía” (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biiv).
- 38 “Sea n(uest)ra fe ensalçada/y en todo el mundo creyda/y quemada y destruyda/qualquiera seta dañada/y todos nos ayunte-mos/a destruyr la eregia/porque sin temor estemos/destos açotes que embia” (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biiv).
- 39 “Questos te(m)blores de aca/y los diluvios de Roma/vienen porque no se doma/el daño de aca y de alla/y pues que tan claro vemos/que de aquesto procedia/porque seguros estemos/vaya fuera la eregia” (Del Río, Baltasar et alii. 1531, biiv).

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