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The Man-Made Disaster: Fire in Cities in the Medieval Middle East

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Abstract: »Die Katastrophe aus Menschenhand: Stadtbrände im mittelalterlichen Nahen Osten«. Considering the building materials and climatic conditions in the medieval Middle East, fires must have been a major problem. This article provides a first survey of sources which are relevant for studying the impact of fires in urban environments. Evidence can be found, for example, in historiographies such as Ibn Kathīr's *The Beginning and the End*, or in legal discussions. Most fires mentioned in these sources were caused during riots or war, or by accidents in markets. The article also analyses how far fires fit into the general pattern of discussions around disasters in medieval Arabic literature.

Defining disasters in medieval Arabic literature

If we look up 'disaster' in a modern English-Arabic dictionary, the word we are likely to find is *kāritha*. In classical Arabic, however, *kāritha* had not yet acquired this meaning.¹ Terms we find here are, among others, *ḥawādith*,² memorable events, or *maṣā'ib*, calamities, alongside others which denote specific disasters of a vague nature (e.g. ignominies or monstrosities), but there is no term which could unambiguously be translated as 'disaster' in a generic sense. But does the absence of such a generic term suggest the absence of a corre-

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¹ *Kāritha*^{um} simply means 'oppressive, distressing' (cf. ULLMANN 1970-, s.v.).

² *Ḥawādith* are not necessarily negative. Ibn al-Ḥimṣī (841/1438-934/1527) in his *Ḥawādith al-zamān wa-wafāyāt al-shuyūkh wa'l-aqrān*, ed. 'Umar 'Abd al-Salām Tadmūrī (Sidon 1999) includes rainfall among these memorable events.

sponding general idea? If we want to reconstruct a concept of disaster in the medieval Middle East, or to decide whether such a concept existed in the first place, one possible approach is to study debates around individual phenomena which are nowadays classified as disasters and search for common patterns (AKASOY forthcoming a).

Before going into details, a methodological caveat needs to be addressed. The texts which include more elaborate discussions of these phenomena are usually characterised by a religious approach. In addition to such texts, there are historiographical records, but they sometimes also employ a religious framework. Both, genuinely religious texts and historiographies, deal with disasters insofar as they are relevant to human beings (as a sign of God, because of their destructive impact, as a memorable event, etc.). In the scientific tradition, i.e. natural philosophy as part of the Greek legacy, phenomena such as earthquakes are usually treated independently of their effect on humans, and hence rarely as disasters.

Despite the fact that disasters are phenomena which become manifest only through their impact on societies,³ in many cases we are not (and probably never will be) able to give a more or less accurate, let alone comprehensive assessment of the impact of disasters on the societies in the region and period under examination here, mainly because of a lack of sources, or because the sources we do have reflect a very specific point of view. It is to be hoped that future research will, to a certain extent, enable us to connect seemingly unrelated events and interpret them as reactions to the events which are referred to as disasters in this article.⁴

There are several contexts in Islamic literature in which phenomena nowadays classified as disasters appear together. The Koran, for example, alludes to punishments of historical peoples because they rejected prophets sent to them by God. They are punished by dramatic transformations of the natural world, the precise character of which often remains somewhat unclear. They might be storms, earthquakes, fires or something else. In the collections of sayings and deeds attributed to the prophet, which were assembled in the ninth century, disasters of a similarly vague character appear as punishments for more contemporary people because of moral misbehaviour. In all these cases God is communicating through nature. He punishes sinners and supports believers.⁵ Disasters are a sign of God's existence as well as of his power and the truth of his revelation.

Lists of disasters which, it is said, will hit specific regions and peoples figure prominently in eschatological traditions. According to a work by the fifteenth-century Egyptian polymath al-Suyūfī, Egypt will be destroyed by the

³ See, for example, the contributions in the volume edited by QUARANTELLI 1998 under the title "What is a Disaster?".

⁴ First steps into this direction are TUCKER 1981 and BIENIEK 2006.

⁵ For disasters in the Koran see AKASOY forthcoming b.

drying-up of the Nile, Medina by famine, Yemen by locusts, the Turks by lightning bolts, the Chinese by sand, the Ethiopians by an earthquake, and Iraq by drought. In addition to these natural disasters, we find man-made destruction. Mecca will be destroyed by the Ethiopians, the Armenians by the Khazars, India by the Chinese etc.⁶ Lists such as this support the assumption that what we should be looking for is a concept of disasters as events with a massive destructive or disruptive impact on human societies rather than natural disasters in a narrow sense.

Another common context is to be found in accounts of martyrdom (CONRAD 1999; COOK 2007). According to Islamic theology, people die as martyrs if they drown, are killed by collapsing buildings, in fires, as victims of epidemics and certain other diseases, or because they were attacked by wild animals. The same applies to those who die an unexpected death or wishing to die as a martyr. Women die as martyrs if they die during labour or as virgins. Someone who dies under such circumstances enjoys the pleasures of the martyrs in the hereafter, albeit the honours in this world are limited to those who die as martyrs on the battlefield. This confirms that disasters did not have exclusively negative consequences. Likewise, in the collections of sayings attributed to the prophet, disasters – as signs from God – are interpreted as ‘punishments for the unbelievers and blessings for the believers.’⁷

Defining disasters on the basis of such debates is not an easy task, not only because what we are encountering here is a very specific, i.e. religious, perspective. We are also often dealing with overlapping categories. Natural disasters are God’s warnings to mankind, but so are unusual events in the sky, for example eclipses, which fit in well with the astrological notion of revolutions (GROH/ KEMPE/ MAUELSHAGEN 2003, p. 16-19), but do not figure in the lists of circumstances of death which fulfil the conditions of martyrdom. Obviously, they do not involve any practical problems such as rebuilding or famines (although they contributed sometimes to the outcomes of otherwise unrelated events such as political unrest or battles).

Furthermore, in religious reasoning, disasters are usually aimed at a group of people when their moral condition is at stake. Whether someone is killed because his house collapses during an earthquake or whether he is eaten by a lion are circumstances which do not affect his status as a martyr in the hereafter. He enjoys these pleasures in either case, whether he has died because of a disaster or an individual misfortune. Relevant for a society is only the earthquake, not the lion – unless the person was killed by the lion under spectacular circumstances. But relevant for a society is also the concept of martyrdom which

⁶ AL-SUYŪṬĪ 1968, i, p. 15, quoted in COOK 2002, p. 266.

⁷ Several quotations to that effect are included in the preface of al-Suyūṭī’s treatise on earthquakes. Cf. *Kashf al-ṣaḡala ‘an waṣf al-zalzala*, editions by ‘Abdallatif Saadani (Fez 1971), ‘Abd al-Rahmān ibn ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Farīwā’ī (Medina 1984) and Muḥammad Kamāl al-Dīn ‘Izz al-Dīn (Beirut, 1987). See also CLÉMENT 1984.

might help believers deal with loss and what is perceived as an injustice of God. As such, the fate of the individual may become part of a narrative or reasoning which sees in a seemingly pointless death the marks of a larger purposeful and divine scheme.

In the contexts I have mentioned so far, we find a great variety of disasters, some ‘natural’, others human induced, all of which in fact happened more or less frequently in the medieval Middle East. Some attracted more attention from writers than others, in particular when there had been earlier debates in Greek texts that were translated into Arabic such as Aristotle’s *Meteorology* on earthquakes and Galen on epidemics. The problem I would like to address in this article concerns another disaster which must have occurred frequently, that is, fires in urban environments. Most of the Middle East remains without rainfall for long periods of the year. Most houses were made from adobe, sticks, reed, palm leaves, etc. (CONRAD 1996, p. 85; AHSAN 1979, p. 178-181). From cities such as Constantinople we have evidence that it was often affected by devastating fires.⁸ In eschatological texts, discussions of martyrdom and astrological works,⁹ fires figure alongside other disasters. So far, however, I have found no separate tradition in Arabic literature which deals exclusively with fires. The only exception is a treatise written after a fire caused by a lightning in the mosque of the prophet in Medina in 886/1481.¹⁰ The text has yet to be studied in detail. In the following I will present a preliminary account of fields which are relevant for the study of fire in medieval Middle Eastern urban environments.

Fire in urban studies

In scholarship on the urban history of the Middle East, fires do not figure prominently. In the indices of books on the history of Cairo or Damascus, for example, they are rarely mentioned. The same applies to recent collections of articles on the urban history of the Middle East. More general terms such as ‘disaster’, ‘risk’ or ‘hazard’ are equally absent. Occasionally authors state that fires were one of the greatest risks or dangers, which sounds intuitively right considering the building materials and the climatic conditions, but they never give any evidence. What one of the best sources for the social history of the medieval Middle East, the Geniza of Cairo, reveals on this issue, or, better to say, what it does not reveal, even seems to render such an intuition moot.

⁸ See the section on fires in the article on Istanbul in the *ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF ISLAM*, second edition, with references to lists of historical fires.

⁹ See the references to fires in ABŪ MA‘SHAR 2000.

¹⁰ ‘Hidāyat al-taṣḍīq ilā ḥikāyat al-tahrīq’, ed. Muḥammad Taqī Dānish Paṣūh in *Yādnāmah-i Irāni-i Minurski* (Tehran 1969), p. 77-113. For the fires of 654/1256 and 886/1481 cf. also SAUVAGET 1947, p. 42-46.

Shlomo Dov Goitein (GOITEIN 1978, p. 10) noted the almost complete lack of references to fire in the letters he had studied. He concluded that fires were infrequent because the floors in Egyptian houses were covered with tiles and there was very little heating and not much cooking.

There are only two research articles which deal with specific fires in the medieval and early modern Middle East. Doris Behrens-Abouseif (BEHRENS-ABOUSEIF 2004), an art historian, has dealt with a fire at the Umayyad mosque in Damascus in 884/1479 and pointed out how in one specific account the author highlighted the virtues of the people of Damascus. Marc David Baer (BAER 2004) showed how after the great fire of 1660, quarters of Istanbul that until then had been occupied by Christians and Jews were assigned to Muslims.

Fire in Arabic historical writing

Arabic histories confirm the assumption that fires were a major problem in the medieval Middle East. The Syrian writer Ibn Kathīr (c. 700/1300-774/1373), for example, frequently refers in his *The Beginning and the End (al-Bidāya wa'l-nihāya)* to fires in Baghdad, Aleppo, Damascus, and other cities, destroying several hundred buildings and killing thousands of people.¹¹ The numbers, we can assume, might have been exaggerated, as was often the case (CONRAD 1996), but the scale of the events seems to have made them noteworthy to Ibn Kathīr and his sources. As in many other Arabic historiographies, fires appear among the memorable events at the beginning of the individual annual entries. Sometimes other disasters are mentioned as well, which might suggest an apocalyptic dimension.

In most cases, Ibn Kathīr does not mention the cause of the fire. If he does, it is often arson during riots and war. Incendiary weapons, especially Greek fire, had been used in the Middle East since antiquity.¹² In these cases, fire was only one aspect of an overall traumatic experience, one face of a human induced disaster in which nature did not play any role.¹³

¹¹ *Al-Bidāya wa'l-nihāya*, several editions, e.g. by Aḥmad Abū Milḥim et al., 14 vols. (Beirut 1994).

¹² See the article *naft* in the *ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF ISLAM*, second edition, AYALON 1956 and PARTINGTON 1960, p. 186-236.

¹³ For the experience of war see CONERMANN 2004 and DE SOMOGYI 1933-1935.

Fires and Islamic law: market law and building regulations

Ibn Kathīr sometimes mentions fires which affected markets: a carpenters' market in 303/915-916, a perfumers' market in 485/1092-1093, a market of feltmakers on 11 Ramaḍān 681/13 December 1282, and in the roofed market of Damascus many cloths and fabrics were destroyed in a fire on 5 Jumāda I 728/18 March 1328. Often he remarks that a great number of shops were destroyed in a fire.¹⁴ The history of markets in the medieval Middle East offers indeed another good starting point for studying the significance of fire in urban environments. 'Islamic' cities usually have a *sūq* or bazaar, which is divided according to different goods and services.¹⁵ This division and the ins and outs of its daily operation were regulated in a special branch of Islamic law that concerns public order, especially in the markets, that is *ḥisba*. The *muḥtasib*, the man in charge of *ḥisba*, had to deal with a number of problems, as is evident from medieval *ḥisba* manuals which developed from the third/ninth century onwards.¹⁶ The inspectors had to control the quality of the goods, for instance check that perfumes and medicinal substances had not been tampered with and that weights and scales had not been manipulated. They were also responsible for health and safety issues in the public sphere, for example it was their duty to ensure that the streets were clean and not obstructed by vehicles or vendors. And they were in charge of moral standards, e.g. they had to make sure there were no improper encounters between men and women and that people dressed properly.¹⁷ In these manuals we find allusions to problems connected with fire. Businesses which needed fire, e.g. bakers, cooks, or those handling metals, had to stay away from those whose goods might be damaged, either by fire or by smoke, above all those who sold clothes. Indeed, those who worked with metal and added noise to the risk of fire and the pollution through smoke had to set up their shops in remoter parts of the market, or even of the city (MAZZOLI-GUINTARD 2003, p. 106). Another measure to reduce the risk of fires was to build roofed markets with stone buildings, as happened, for example, in Constantinople, but, as seen above, Ibn Kathīr mentions also a case of such a building catching fire.

¹⁴ See also BEHRENS-ABOUSEIF 2004, p. 288. The fire broke out when a shoemaker asked his wife to prepare candle fat and some fat dropped on hemp which caught fire. When they noticed it, they became scared and left with their belongings without informing anybody.

¹⁵ See, for example, RAYMOND 1994, p. 13. See also the article *sūq* in the *ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF ISLAM*, second edition. Whether or not it makes much sense to speak of 'Islamic' cities in the first place, has been much debated in recent literature. For a critique of Orientalist images of the Islamic city see ABU-LUGHOD 1987.

¹⁶ See the article on *ḥisba* in the *ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF ISLAM*, second edition, and SHAY-ZARĪ 1999.

¹⁷ This was in a sense another form of disaster-prevention, since it decreased the risk of being punished by God for moral misbehaviour.

We find similar regulations for private people in building laws (HAKIM 1986; KAHERA/ BENMIRA 1998; AL-BANNĀ' 1999). One of the principles that jurists attributed to the prophet is that harming a neighbour should be avoided (AKBAR 1988, p. 93-106) and this included annoyances such as noise, movements from stables, and also problems connected with fire. It seems, however, that these issues were less thought of as hazards, but more as nuisances.¹⁸ The main problem with fire was – at least in the discussions of the legal scholars – not the risk of having one's house burned down, but the smoke which left traces on neighbouring building. Often such problems were solved by building a chimney. We are dealing here less with risk management, than with what Kahera and Benmira have described as negotiating space, i.e. who was allowed to use which space for which purpose, private or commercial.¹⁹ At stake very often were questions of privacy.

To date I have found little evidence of preventive measures. The Egyptian historian Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam (c. 182/798 or 799-257/871) claims that at the time of the governor 'Abd al-'Azīz, there was a corps of five hundred men prepared to fight fires and other emergencies (IBN 'ABD AL-ḤAKAM 1995, p. 129; KUBIAK 1987, p. 105 note). Furthermore, another Egyptian historian, al-Maqrīzī (766/1364-845/1442), mentions in a longer account of several fires which hit Cairo in 721/1321 (for which see below) (MEINECKE 1992, ii, p. 131f. numbers 132f.) that from then on shopkeepers had to have two buckets with water prepared. In other cities, the general availability of water might have been sufficient, but shopkeepers seem to have been obliged to contribute their share to the maintenance of public safety.²⁰ The brief accounts we have of what happened when fires broke out in cities in the medieval Middle East suggest

¹⁸ MAZZOLI-GUINTARD 2003, p. 173, mentions the case of a woman in Cordova who complained in 1040 about smoke coming out of an oven outside her house which reduced the value of the building, according to Mazzoli because of the risk of fire, even though it is not clear whether this is mentioned in the primary source or her interpretation. The source referred to by Mazzoli-Guintard was not available to me: Ibn Sahl, *Wathā'iq fī shu'ūn al-'umrān fī 'l-Andalus: al-masājid wa'l-dūr*, ed. M. Khallāf (Cairo 1983), p. 98-111 and p. 30. For the religious implications of the smoke problem see AKBAR 1988, p. 227, note 20 and Koran, sura 44.

¹⁹ KAHERA/ BENMIRA 1998, p. 132 analyse legal sources as testimonies to a "coherent juristic discourse that deals with various socio-spatial conflicts". The emphasis is on negotiating spatial behaviour in order to solve existing or prevent immediately looming personal conflicts, rather than to deal with non-personal hazards. "Mixing of residential and commercial buildings was a problem and a cause of many disputes", IBID., p. 151.

²⁰ ZIADEH 1953, p. 112 for Damascus. LAPIDUS 1967, p. 66 writes about Mamluk cities: "Other tasks equally important in maintaining public life were also assigned the shopkeepers. They were occasionally made responsible for sanitary measures such as removing stray dogs. Shopkeepers also were obliged to hang out lanterns at night and to prepare water buckets as a precaution against fire".

that there were no formal regulations as to who would be in charge of what.²¹ The manuals for market inspectors never mention such cases.

A key role seems to have been played by gangs of young men or urban militias (*aḥdāth* or *ʿayyārūn*, irregular fighters). Claude Cahen, for example, in his article on *aḥdāth* in the *ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF ISLAM*, discusses the characteristics of these groups, especially in Aleppo and Damascus between the fourth/tenth and sixth/twelfth centuries, and mentions that they were in charge of fire-fighting. This may very well have been the case, in particular if the city was under attack and fire-fighting was part of urban defence. They were probably also groups that could be easily mobilised in times of peace. Yet their role was ambiguous, to say the least. Whenever Ibn Kathīr mentions these groups of young men in fire-related contexts, they are involved in turmoil as supporters of a political or religious faction and cause fires rather than fight them.²² Normally, reactions must have been organised on the spot by the affected people. Ibn Kathīr mentions, for example, how during a fire in Baghdad in 510/1116-1117 the jurists saved the books of the Nizāmiyya library. A more detailed description is also preserved in al-Maqrīzī's account of the fire in Cairo in 721/1321 (translation in ABŪ SĀLIḤ 1969, p. 328-340). When the people did not succeed in putting out the fire, they climbed the minarets, prayed and lamented. At the same time, however, water carriers were prevented from leaving the city and had to carry water from schools and baths. Additional water from the river was transported by men and camels. Parts of buildings that were likely to catch fire (beams etc.) were removed (as during the fire at the Umayyad mosque in 884/1479), and even houses were pulled down. There is probably evidence in other historiographical sources waiting for scholars to dig it up.

An interesting question, which, at present, we can hardly answer, is: What happened after a fire? From the two research articles on fires in Damascus and Istanbul mentioned above we can see that rebuilding was often a political issue. Rulers might not have gone so far as to demolish buildings which represented the authority of previous dynasties or relocate religious minorities, but in such cases fires offered welcome opportunities for reshaping the structure of a city. Ibn Kathīr confirms this. When in Shaʿbān 461/May or June 1069 the Umayyad mosque in Damascus was struck by a fire, the Abbasid authorities delayed its reconstruction for a long time²³, presumably because of their hostile attitude

²¹ An impression shared by BEHRENS-ABOUSEIF 2004, p. 281, who suggests that the responsibility for emergency responses might have been with the office of the sultan's master-builder in Damascus. The earliest professional fire fighters seem to have been in Istanbul in the eighteenth century, following a French model, cf. the article on Istanbul in the *ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF ISLAM*, second edition.

²² For riots see also GREHAN 2003.

²³ According to IBN KATHĪR 1969 (year 461); Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntazam fī tawārīkh al-mulūk wa'l-umam*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār, 13 vols. (Beirut 1995-1996) claimed that the fire happened three years earlier in 458/1066. According to both authors, it was caused by fights between supporters of rivaling parties.

towards the earlier dynasty. Rebuilding was also an opportunity for individuals to demonstrate their piety and generosity.

As far as the immediate aftermath of a fire is concerned, the historiographical works mention cases in which famous men were present in a city when a fire broke out, and they helped to extinguish the fire and contributed to the compensation of the affected people. When, according to Ibn Kathīr, Damascus was hit by a fire in the late 260s/late 870s, Aḥmad ibn Ṭūlūn, the founder of the Tulunid dynasty, went to the scene in the company of other important men, including his secretary, and had 70,000 dinars paid as compensation to the afflicted. In 323/934-935, people (presumably in Baghdad) were compensated by the Abbasid Caliph al-Rāḍī, and in Dhū 'l-Ḥijja 559/October or November 1164, the Fatimid vizier Asad al-Dīn Shīrkūh himself helped fight a fire. These might of course be fabricated stories, but especially in cases of buildings of religious significance we have independent testimonies confirming such prestigious contributions.²⁴ So far I have found no evidence which suggests that a person who started a fire by mistake was held responsible. According to the fifteenth-century Tunisian builder and writer Ibn al-Rāmī, liability was limited to people who maintained fires in their houses without permission.²⁵

The situation was again different with buildings that had been deliberately set on fire or when such a suspicion was raised. Islamic law deals with the problem of arson as a deliberate attack,²⁶ but as far as the cases mentioned in historiographies are concerned, arson is usually in one way or another politically motivated. The latter could turn into a disaster, but the former would have usually been limited to the level of individual misfortunes. Ibn Kathīr mentions briefly that after the fires in Cairo in 721/1321 the Christians were blamed and punished (TRITTON 1930, p. 61-77; ABBOTT 1937, p. 172; BOSWORTH 1972, p. 65; LITTLE 1976). Longer accounts of these events are preserved in the histories of al-ʿAynī (762/1361-855/1451) and al-Maqrīzī.²⁷ They suggest that the development started with riots against the Copts during which several churches were destroyed. After these riots several major fires broke out in the Muslim quarters. According to the Muslim historians, this was due to Christian

²⁴ See the account by Ibn al-Ḥimṣī on the fire at the Umayyad mosque, as analysed by Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *passim*. Ibn al-Ḥimṣī describes in detail the contributions to the reconstruction of the mosque and emphasises the solidarity among the inhabitants of Damascus. Cf. also the literature on the fires in the prophet's mosque in Medina, above note 10.

²⁵ HAKIM 1986, p. 31f., quoting Ibn al-Rāmī, p. 22 (Fes lithograph). For Ibn al-Rāmī see also KAHERA/ BENMIRA 1998, p. 138. See also AKBAR 1988, p. 98. See BEHRENS-ABOUSEIF 2004, p. 287 for individuals punished after the fire, probably because they did not intervene or were blamed for faulty construction/planning. For civil liability and unintentional damage cf. YANAGIHASHI 2004, p. 20.

²⁶ YANAGIHASHI 2004, p. 20, and for a later case PETERS 2005, p. 96.

²⁷ Apparently both used the same source which is no longer preserved, see LITTLE 1976, p. 553. The references to the events are to al-Maqrīzī's text (year 721): Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk li-maʿrifat duwal al-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyāda, 4 vols. (Cairo 1934-1972).

retaliation – several individuals were caught with incendiary devices (naphtha, rolled in rags soaked in oil and pitch).²⁸

In an article in which he compared reactions to the plague among Christians in Europe and Muslims in the Middle East, Michael Dols (DOLS 1974) pointed out that in Europe epidemics happened at the same time as persecutions of Jews who were blamed for the disaster, but that this was something which did not occur in the Middle East, since Muslims regarded the plague as a divine punishment.²⁹ The anti-Christian riots in Egypt, however, suggest that the situation was more complicated.³⁰

In the medieval Middle East, disasters were connected to problems of political authority in a variety of ways. When it comes to assessing the relation between the specific case of fires and political authority, we face a number of different cases. In some, fires might have been welcome to rulers since they strengthened their authority, in others they might have contributed to their downfall. As far as the oft-quoted concept of vulnerability is concerned, the case of the fires in Cairo alerts us not only to the fact that it was often a specific part of a society that was exposed to dangers because of socio-topographical reasons, but that sometimes the behaviour of one part of a society could have a disastrous effect on another.

Conclusions

To a certain degree fires fit well into the general pattern of disasters in the medieval Middle East. But as a human induced disaster they were clearly different from earthquakes or floods. They did not imply any transformation of the natural world, and culprits could often be identified (except if a fire was caused by lightning). In most cases fires probably did not have any significant consequences. They were annoying because of smoke and grime, they occasionally destroyed goods in the market, but the source of the fire must have been obvious, as we can see clearly in legal regulations. There were measures to reduce the risk, even though they were not comprehensive or thoroughly organised and are not spelled out in our sources. Human induced disasters could, however, still be divine signs and punishments. Invasions from the East, such as the Mongols, were after all also considered a divine punishment. When it comes to the question of how people reacted to fires, we have to distinguish carefully between the two causes of fire which were apparently the most important: (market) accidents and deliberate destruction. In one case, we find basic

²⁸ See TRITTON 1930, p. 69. It is not clear whether this was simply a rumour, or perhaps people were caught and wrongly accused, or this was indeed a retaliation.

²⁹ In Europe, the persecutions actually started before the plague broke out. They were not spontaneous reactions to a disaster. See TOCH 1998, p. 62.

³⁰ For persecutions of Jews in times of crisis see also HUNWICK 1985.

precautions, in the other case, it would have been difficult to implement these rules, if the main challenge was to maintain law and order, for example, if a city was under attack, or if peace was shattered by riots.

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