

Divining Disaster

Signs of Catastrophe in Ancient Greek Culture

By

Michiel van Veldhuizen



BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON

Contents

List of Figures and Tables	XI
Abbreviations and Translations	XII

Introduction: "Do You Bring a Sign of Some War, Or ...?" (463 BCE)	1
1 Terrors of the Sign	1
2 Pindar's Terrifying Eclipse	4
3 Divining Disaster	8
4 "What Is Disaster?"	11
5 The Ecocritical Perspective	14
6 Agency, Vulnerability, and Resilience	18
7 Uncertainty	22
8 An Ancient Greek Mentality	24
9 A Comparative Perspective	29
10 Structure and Organization of the Book	32

PART I

Divination and Semiotics: "Those Were the Signs" (494 BCE)

Introduction to Part I	37
1 Ancient Divination	40
1 Chian Catastrophe	40
2 Delian Disaster	43
3 "The Theology of the Age"	44
4 Defining Divination	46
5 A Cognitive Turn	51
6 <i>Zeichenbeobachtung</i>	54
2 Classifying the Sign	57
1 Peirce's Triadic Sign	57
2 A Divinatory Paradigm	60
3 Basic Sign Classifications	62
4 Natural vs. Technical Divination	65
5 Interpreting the Sign	67
6 "I Opened Their Eyes to the Signs"	70

- 3 Naming the Sign 74**
- 1 Tzetzes' Terminology 74
 - 2 *Sēma* and *Sēmainō* 77
 - 3 *Teras*: Signs and Monsters 79
 - 4 *Teras*: Thunder, Snakes, and Rainbows 80
 - 5 *Teras*: Monsters and Monstrous Babies 85
 - 6 From *Teras* to *Tekmar*: A Cognitive Perspective 88
 - 7 *Tekmar*: Plotting Paths 91
 - 8 *Tekmar*: "Conjecture the Invisible" 93
 - 9 *Tekmērion*: Toward a Secular Semiotics 95
- 4 Abductive Reasoning 100**
- 1 "We Must Conquer the Truth by Guessing" 100
 - 2 The Divinatory Sign in Action: Chios Revisited 103
 - 3 The Divinatory Sign in Action: Delos Revisited 105
 - 4 The Divinatory Sign in Action: Monster at the Mysteries 107
 - 5 Codes, Conditionals, and Compendia 109
 - 6 Signs and Causes: Soft and Hard Astrology 114
 - 7 Divining Disaster with the Stars: From Hesiod to Berossus 115
 - 8 Divining Disaster with the Stars: Chaldeans and Egyptians 118
 - 9 Divining Disaster with the Stars: Ptolemy 122

PART 2

Disasters and Definitions: "Disasters in the Sun" (1601)

- Introduction to Part 2 127**
- 5 Three Modes of Disaster: Plutarch, Shakespeare, Derrida 130**
- 1 A Neologism in *Hamlet* 130
 - 2 Disaster-as-Sign: Shakespeare's Reception of Plutarch 134
 - 3 Disaster-as-Condition: Edmund the Bastard 138
 - 4 Disaster-as-Event and Derrida's *Événement* 141
 - 5 Verticality, Apocalypse, and *Le Ciel Désastré* 143
- 6 Translating Ancient Disaster 147**
- 1 *Un Mot Chaldaique* 147
 - 2 Theseus' Advice 149
 - 3 Breaking the Stalk, Felling the Crops 153
 - 4 Accidental and Violent Fallings 157
 - 5 The Semantic Field of Disaster in Ancient Greek 158

- 6 Military Disaster Lexicon: Sicily and Chaeronea 162
- 7 Military Disaster Lexicon: Cannae 165
- 8 Categories of Disaster 168

- 7 **Staging Disaster in Tragedy and History** 170
 - 1 Remembering Disaster 170
 - 2 Thucydides' Disaster List 172
 - 3 Divining Disaster on Stage: Darius 175
 - 4 Divining Disaster on Stage: Heracles 178
 - 5 Disasters in the Sun 182
 - 6 Polybius on Pity and Folly 186

PART 3

Agency and Punishment: "How Can I Have Lunch?" (1799)

- Introduction to Part 3 193

- 8 **The Sunken City of Helike** 196
 - 1 Spectacle of Absence 196
 - 2 Divining the Helike Disaster: Scrofani 199
 - 3 Helike's Ancient Testimony 201
 - 4 "The God Is Wont to Send Signs" 203
 - 5 Interpreting the Helike Disaster: Religion vs Science 206
 - 6 Divining the Helike Disaster: Aelian 209
 - 7 Hermeneutic Disaster Management 212

- 9 **Moral Agency and Punitive Disaster** 215
 - 1 Agency Reconsidered 215
 - 2 From Angry Poseidon to Bessie's Hurricane 216
 - 3 Punishment, or "A Blessing in Disguise" 218
 - 4 Acts of Nature, Acts of God 221
 - 5 Helike Revisited: Anger and Survival 224
 - 6 Helike Revisited: Signs and Meaning 225

- 10 **Poseidon's Disaster Agency** 228
 - 1 Signs, Symbols, Myth 228
 - 2 "God of Brute Force" 229
 - 3 Poseidon's Mode of Action 231
 - 4 Breaking Open the Earth 233
 - 5 Leveling the Achaean Wall 235

- 6 Covering with Mountains: Phaeacia and Polybotes 238
- 7 Rooting the Phaeacian Ship 242
- 8 Immobilizing Alcatheos 244
- 9 Divining Disaster: Alcinous 247
- 10 Divining Disaster: Polyphemus 251

PART 4

Uncertainty and Suffering: "Hell, Upside Down" (1971)

- Introduction to Part 4 255
- 11 **Imagining Disaster aboard *The Poseidon*** 258
 - 1 From New York to Athens 258
 - 2 "We've Turned Over": Imagining Disaster 260
 - 3 "Robinson Crusoe on a World-Wide Scale" 262
 - 4 The Banality of Disaster 265
 - 5 "There Were No Landmarks" 267
- 12 **The Disaster Geography of the Argonauts** 271
 - 1 Finding the Way Out 271
 - 2 Rocks and Currents 273
 - 3 "In the Grip of Perfect Calm" 275
 - 4 Divining Disaster: Restoring Sights and Sounds 278
 - 5 Divining Disaster: Decoding the Sign 280
 - 6 The Black Emptiness of *Katoulas* 282
 - 7 The Sibyl Divines Disaster 284
 - 8 Vesuvius, Giants, and Cosmic Disaster 285
- 13 **Negative Cosmology: Titans, Typhoeus, and Tartarus** 290
 - 1 Soundscapes of Divine and Human Strife 290
 - 2 Crashing Gaia and Cosmic Conflagration 294
 - 3 Typhoeus and Athena 297
 - 4 Typhoeus as Cosmic *Teras* 299
 - 5 The Disaster State of Tartarus 301
- 14 **Bound and Adrift: Prometheus, Io, and the Island of Delos** 304
 - 1 Hesiod's *mega pēma*: Erratic Winds 304
 - 2 Hesiod's *mega pēma*: Coma and Exile 306
 - 3 God in Exile 308

- 4 Prometheus Bound, Io Adrift 311
- 5 "Tangled in Disaster's Endless Net" 313
- 6 The Floating Island 316
- 7 The Polysemy of Delos 318
- 8 The Mobility of Delos: *akinēton teras* 321
- 9 Home to Octopuses and Seals 323
- 10 Divining Disaster: An Island and an Oracle 326

PART 5

Vulnerability and Contagion: "A Protean Disease" (2020)

- Introduction to Part 5 333
- 15 The Plague as Semiotic Monster 335
 - 1 Dr. Fauci Goes to Marseille 335
 - 2 The Bees of Aristaeus 338
 - 3 The Disaster Triad 340
 - 4 Disaster in Hesiod's Wicked City 343
 - 5 Sterility and Strife 346
 - 6 Divining Disasters with Monsters: The Sphinx and the *Kētos* 349
 - 7 Divining Disasters with Monsters: The Minotaur 352
 - 8 A Typology of the Monstrous 355
- 16 Oracles and Plague in Historical Narrative 358
 - 1 Divining *Loimos* and Oracular Divination 358
 - 2 Herodotus: *Loimos* for the Chians 362
 - 3 Herodotus: *Loimos* for the Cretans and Persians 364
 - 4 David's Dilemma: Plague, Famine, or War? 367
 - 5 Josephus' Plague-as-Plague 369
 - 6 Divining Disaster: David and Epimenides 373
 - 7 Curing the Plague: From Abaris to Hippocrates 376
 - 8 Thucydides Divines Disaster 379
- Conclusion: "A Strange Stillness" (1962) 384
 - 1 Andrà Tutto Bene 384
 - 2 Divining Disaster for the Modern Ecocritic 388
 - 3 The *longue durée* of Disaster Discourse 389
- Bibliography 393
- Index 413