



Civilization and Tsunamis

It is a signal irony that, within days of the apocalyptic earthquake and tsunami that have brought Japan to her knees, archaeologists announced the possible discovery, after millenia of speculation, of the ruins of the legendary lost civilization of Atlantis, buried deep beneath the marshes of the Coto Doñana in southwestern Spain.

Atlantis, originally referenced in Plato's dialogue *Timotheus*, was purportedly the original tsunami victim, a great civilization located on a now-sunken landmass to the west of the Pillars of Hercules (as the Strait of Gibraltar was known in antiquity) that perished overnight in a great earthquake and the wave that followed. The legendary Atlanteans learned what other civilizations since have learned, at fairly long intervals: that the awesome power of earthquakes — especially the “megathrust” variety that spawned both the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 and the Japanese cataclysm — and the tsunamis they beget sometimes redirect the entire course of history, leaving the ruins of an Old Order in their wake.



Another such event occurred in 365 AD in the eastern Mediterranean. Ammianus Marcellinus, often considered the last of the Classical historians, described it thus:

On 21 July ... a frightful disaster, surpassing anything related either in legend or authentic history, overwhelmed the whole world. Day had just dawned when, after a thunderstorm of exceptional violence, the solid frame of the earth shuddered and trembled, and the sea was removed from its bed and went rolling back. The abyss of the deep was laid open; various types of marine creatures could be seen stuck in the slime, and huge mountains and valleys which had been hidden since the creation in the depths of the waves then, one must suppose, saw the light of the sun for the first time. Many ships were stranded on what was now dry land, and a host of people roamed at large in the shallows that were left to pick up fish and similar objects. Then, however, the roaring sea ... turned back, and rushed over the seething shoals to burst in fury upon islands and wide tracts of the mainland. Innumerable buildings in towns or wherever they were standing were leveled to the ground, and the whole face of the earth was changed by this mad conflict of the elements.... The sudden return of the vast sea when it was least expected drowned many thousands; when the watery element again subsided many ships had been destroyed by the force of the tidal wave.

The great tsunami of 365 AD ravaged cities all over the eastern Mediterranean, and must have inflicted



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heavy economic damage on an already decrepit Roman Empire. It is impossible to assert cause and effect of events so scantily documented nearly two millenia past, but it is probably no coincidence that the years immediately following this unexampled disaster marked the beginning of the end for the once-invincible Roman Empire. In the 370s, the Gothic hordes that the Emperor Valens had permitted to settle in the Eastern Roman Empire revolted against Roman authority. In 378, Valens himself, along with the flower of the Roman military, fell in the epic defeat at the hand of the Goths at Adrianople, the first in a series of defeats to invaders from the East who completely destroyed the Western Roman Empire in the following century. Had Roman finances been fatally wounded by the cataclysm of 365, leaving her military underfinanced and unprepared to confront a challenger as strong as the Gothic host?

In the mid-18th Century, another great earthquake/tsunami combination recharted the course of history. On November 1, 1755, the city of Lisbon, Portugal, was utterly destroyed by the worst earthquake in Western Europe in modern times. The earthquake struck in the morning when much of Lisbon was in church celebrating [All Saints' Day](#), leveling much of the city. A huge tsunami followed, sweeping away much of what had survived the temblor, including tens of thousands of luckless souls who were convinced the end of the world was at hand. Most of the few buildings that were left standing were burned in a conflagration that finished off the ruined city. Roughly 50,000 people — a quarter of the population of Lisbon — are believed to have died. So powerful was the quake that it was felt as far away as Finland and possibly even Greenland, while the enormous tsunami traversed the Atlantic and struck a few Caribbean islands, in addition to ravaging the Portuguese and North African coastlines.

The sudden destruction of Lisbon had a profound effect on European history. For one thing, one of Europe's preeminent imperial powers was virtually destroyed in a few terrible hours. About 85 percent of Lisbon's buildings, including opulent palaces, churches, libraries, and a brand new opera house, were leveled by quake, water, and fire, a blow from which once-proud imperial Portugal — nowadays Western Europe's poorest nation — was never to recover.

The Lisbon disaster also altered many Europeans' views on God and man. If God was just and loving, many wondered, how could He have permitted such a thing to happen to pious, Catholic Portugal — and on a holy day, at that? Among those in whom the Lisbon earthquake engendered cynicism about God and religion was Voltaire, who saw in the catastrophe evidence that we do not live in the best of all possible worlds, supervised by a benevolent deity. An intellectual fellow-traveler of Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, champion of the "noble savage," saw the earthquake as evidence that cities are a vulnerable, unnatural environment in which to live. Voltaire and Rousseau, hardened and radicalized by the earthquake, were enormously influential on the French Revolution that followed three decades later, a revolution that utterly overthrew the Old Order in France and, in the longer run, elsewhere in Europe. The upheavals of the Napoleonic era, as well as those associated with the numerous radical revolutionary movements, up to the present day, that have been inspired by the French Revolution, all trace their secularist pedigree to the revolutionary anti-religious ferment encouraged by the Great Lisbon Earthquake.

On [Boxing Day](#), 2004, a tragedy unprecedented in modern history unfolded across the nations of the Indian Ocean as an enormous tsunami scoured the coastlines of Indonesia, Thailand, Burma, India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and even East Africa, claiming hundreds of thousands of lives and desolating entire cities. All of the scenes described by Ammianus were re-enacted, but on a much greater scale than that experienced by the Romans. Yet the long-term impact of this event on the world at large was



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minimal, because the countries affected were and remain poor.

The Japanese disaster is quite a different story. This disaster, whose effects are still unfolding, is the first such event in our time to strike a modern economy. As expected, modern building codes designed to withstand the strongest earthquakes kept most of the Sendai area standing, where much more modest temblors in poor countries — like last year’s Haitian quake — have leveled entire cities and exacted apocalyptic death tolls.

But no amount of modern precautionary measures could prepare Japan for the tsunami that followed. Like its historical predecessors in the Mediterranean and Portugal, the great wave obliterated almost everything in its path, sweeping passenger trains off rails, inundating modern airports, washing away entire villages and cities, and scouring the Sendai area of boats, cars, trucks, and buses. The death toll is weeks, if not months, from a final reckoning, but tens of thousands have surely perished in this epochal disaster.

In this author’s opinion, the rest of the world has yet to appreciate the broader impact this event will have, not only on Japan but on the rest of the developed world. Before the quake, Japan was already the world’s most indebted nation, owing more than twice her GDP. Despite Japan’s flair for cutting-edge technology (she knows no peers in robotics, for example), her economy has been stalled for the better part of 20 years while the Bank of Japan has inflicted round after round of “quantitative easing” in a vain attempt to jump-start the Japanese markets.

With no wiggle room, Japan will have to take drastic measures to fund such a recovery as she can afford. That may include selling her vast holdings (\$880 billion, second only to China) in U.S. debt, with potentially calamitous consequences for the dollar and already fragile world currency markets. Indeed, it is unlikely Japan will ever be able to recover from the monumental setback fortune has dealt her without some kind of default and debt restructuring. The shock such actions will propagate through world financial markets will be considerable.

In a word, this tragedy has probably dealt modern Japan and its debt-driven economy the coup de grace. “Civilization,” historian Will Durant once observed, “exists by geological consent, subject to change without notice.” Like the great tsunamis that have humbled empires in earlier ages, will this one forever change the world as our generation has known it?



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