“... which will not have been more terrible at Sodoma and Gomorra.”
—Unknown (1618) [Editor added]

September 4, 1618: The landslide of Plurs

- By David Bressan on September 4, 2011
- It's not possible to describe/

The unspeakable power of god/
So he on the evening of the 25 August/
Terrible has done in this valley to the place of Plurs/
Where a part of the mountain was taken down/
Just on target of Plurs/

(Anonymous, Chiavenna 26 August 1618)
The 25 August 1618, after our modern calendar the 4 September, was the first sunny day after a rainy period from the 15 to 20. August, and the inhabitants of the village of Plurs (former Swiss city, today Italian, near present day Piuro) in the shadow of the Monte Conto, enjoyed the weather.

[See video describing the avalanche by the present-day town of Piuro.]

The mining for talcum, by locals called Lavazzi [stone] and appreciated for its fire resistance, found in the flanks of Monte Conto had brought for centuries a humble wealth to the region. 500m above the village the horizontally disposed talcum layers in the gneiss were excavated in a very careless way - no boles were used in the mines, and no material was relocated in the tunnels to support the overlying mountain, even the authorities never controlled the security of these improvised quarries.

Instabilities, like fissures in the rocks and rumours coming from the mountain were noted during the last years, but not considered threatening. Local chronicles tell that before July 25, 1618 "the mountain [is] always torn [apart], its even open and 10 years ago [it was] fissured."

The 25 August strange phenomena's were reported, the soil shacked and fissure opened just under standing persons, from the inside of Monte Conte loud "bangs" were heard, bee swarms flee from the forest or felt dead from the sky, cows left their pastures and in some places an intensive stench of sulphur laid in the air.

Fortunat Sprecher zu Bernegg, commissar of the nearby village of Claven (modern Chiavenna) reported after the catastrophe: "After midday there began rock falls and debris flows went down, destroying some vineyards at Chilan" (located southeast of Plurs).

Bartholomäus Anhorn, pastor of Claven: "At 4 o'clock in the afternoon a rock fall of the mountain of Conte happened, from the side were the Lavazzi are mined."

Figure 3: September 4, 1618: The Landslide of Plurs, a man-made disaster, kills up to 2,500 townspeople due to negligent talc mining practices. [Added by the editor from the video depiction.]
At midnight the landslide occurred, smashing the entire village of Plurs and killing estimated 1,000 to 2,500 people, there were only six "survivors", being the fatal night not in the affected area.

Anhorn: "It was torn out [the mountain], but not so much, until the beginning of the dark of night. Then from the mountain the greatest part broke out with great rumour, and has buried completely the beautiful place with the small village of Chilan."
Eyewitnesses' stories report the terrible sound, a large dust cloud with "ligthenings" and a "strange, stinking vapour".

Sprecher mentions regarding the dust cloud "even if I was at a half of hour distance of Plurs, my hat become covered by the raised dust. The river Mara was dammed by the Rufi [landslide] landslide for one and a half hours. The landslide at many places is 5 Spiess [ca. 30m, modern thickness estimates range between 8 to 10m] thick and you can't see any spire of a church."
Figure 5: Print by Johann Hardmeyer, Zurich 1618, depicting Plurs before and after the landslide (figure from HAUER 2009).
It's interesting to note that after the disaster rumours were put in circulation, depicting the inhabitants of Plurs corrupted by their wealth.

The clergyman Francé tells the story "of an earthly paradise with all sorts of lusts", and the disaster is "an example of the fury of god above sins", then "the peaks of the mountains, who raised behind Plurs, felt down and the entire place [...] with all people became buried in night and terror."
A more naturalistic approach is tried by E.G. Happel in his "Größte Denkwürdigkeiten der Welt" (The greatest wonder on world, 1683-1689):

"What a large earthquake can do, the small city of Pleurs can testimony [...] it laid under a steep rock wall and there were much rich and noble people. In the year 1618, the 25. August on the old calendar, with sunset, that great overhanging rock was torn apart by a might sub terrestrial force and thrown on the city, the greatest part of it buried and destroyed with all churches, houses and palaces which were abundant.

It was such a rock piece, that thousand of people couldn't possibly move it and so Pleurs was beaten in the earth, nothing as some houses and a small church, so near, and yet untouched, could be seen after the fall.

No living soul could escape from it, and it's impossible to see were the city once was situated. But it was situated on the river called Mera, who was so obstructed by the fallen boulders that the water grow in height and so another city - named Claven - was threatened with doom. But God finally showed to the water a way nearby the mentioned city - so it was saved."

Today nothing reminds the old Plaurs, still buried under the landslide - the area today is used for pasture and agriculture use. Only chronicles tell of two recuperated items in 1767 and 1861: the bells of a church were found in the debris.

Bibliography:


Figure 8: Matthäus Merian. (1642, 1654). Plurs before and after the landslide. Illustration from Martin Zeiller, Topographia Helvetiae. [Added by the editor for a fuller record of these events.]
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Of the sudden change in the well-known place of Plurs in the mountain

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- The reproduction follows in the spelling of the original.
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- Overwritten e over the vowels a, o and u are transcribed as modern umlauts.

Great and terrifying news newspaper / Of the sudden change / deß well known patches of Plurs in Bergel / and common three Bünten / Like a sudden ruina Anderseytes deß Berges surrendered / and completely covered the whole spot in an instant repealed / covered / discarded and executed / happened in this 1618th year.

On August 25th old or Sep. November Newes Calenders Evenings between day and night / Almighty God has demonstrated his great power and violence / and wanted to demonstrate his great power and violence in the rich spot of Plurs / in which he forgave and allowed a ruina to come down from a mountain on the other hand / even more secure than a Boltz of a longing / attacked the whole patch in an instant / yes completely lifted / covered / discarded / and thus added / which will not have been more terrible at Sodoma and Gomorra / then such huge buildings of churches / palaces and other houses / when it was erbawt / just not some ground / stone or footsteps / that one would see / this or that building was standing there or there / yes someone / who had not previously seen this place / the spot / was not to be discussed / that ever a lot Buildings stood there who / then on the Seyten / since the churches of Sant Johann stood and was built on a mountain / it is lower than elsewhere / so that the water or the river / the Mera facing its course there / that it all opens up the same seyten / thrown over from the ground up on the other beings / and burying everything / that at this moment / man / Weyb / and child at 1500. souls / when one may be in danger / are miserably depraved / and at the same time one started to dig on top / and to search for the dead bodies / which one can find ready at the same time / so it is not possible / that in many years one would like to get the smallest part / and will never for ever / in this place can be bawted / So now through this from pale vnd Ruina the water / so through this that the Mera was closed / closed / and remained for two hours.
All of this at Cleuen has arisen in a very big way / and the whole night was expected and worried for the rest of the night / but praise God / has made the water by itself / so that God never wants to tighten / there is more danger of not worrying / God Almighty forbade that we should be converted and moved to redeeming his terrible anger / so that we fall into his hands / do not realize that he suddenly appeals to us in the same his fierce anger / for the sake of Christ his dear Son / amen.

Esaias on the 5th of Capittel.

So last and this terrible beyspi / Carefully look at often vnd vil /

God forbids vil misery / But a people who eat

Wandlet auff earth in every place /

Oh that we don't spoil

As God speaks in the Prophet / By Esaiam vns report /

Yes suddenly die from earth both

God's wrath is kindled / About a people who sin

In your sake do continue / Without fear they die years ago.

O LORD vmb your grace we ask

Whether their happiness is great Will not be released from his punishment /

And that today we raise the day /

He will pay her in his grim That over them the mountain invade

Turn away the vbel in front of the door /

As God speaks in the Prophet /

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Either beyspi / Carefully look at often vnd vil /
Von dem plötzlichen vndergang / deß wol bekandten Flecken Plurs im Bergel / vnd gemeinen dreyen Bünten gelegen /
unbekannt

Daniel Mannesser, Augsburg, 1618

Exportiert aus Wikisource am 13. April 2021
Warhaftige vnd erschröckliche Newe Zeitung / Von dem plötzlichen vndergang / deß

En 25. seyten / von August grund an
i Altes hinnüber auff oder 4. die ander
Septem Seyten ber geworffen /
Newes vnnd alles vergraben / das also in disem Augenblick /
Mann / Weyb / vnd Kind bey 1500. Seelen /
as man ohngefahr schetzen mag /
jämmerlich
Ruina anderstheils von verdorben seind
einem Berg herab gelassen // vnd man
wellicher als ein Boltz von gleichwol
einer sehnen / in einem angefangen
Augenblick den gantzen obenhero zu
Flecken vberfallen / ja von graben / vnd
ground auffgehebt / verdeckt die Todten
/ verworffen / vnd also Körper zu
zugericht / das zu Sodoma suchen / deren
vnd Gomorra schier nit man gleichwol
schröcklicher wirdt haben allbereit
sein künden / dann solche gefunden / so
gewaltige Gebäw von ist es doch nicht
Kirchen / Palesten vnd möglich / das in
anderen Häusern / als es vilen Jahren
erbawt gewesen ist / nur man möchte
nicht einiger grund / stein den geringsten
oder füßstapffen / das man theil bekommen
sehen künde / da oder dort / vnd wol zu
ist das oder jehnes Gebäw ewigen zeitten
gestanden / ja einer / der nimmermehr /
zuvor nicht dieses Ort / den an disem Ort
Flecken gesehen hette / kan gebawt
wurde nicht zu bereden sein werden / Also
/ das jemals einiges Gebäw nun durch disen
dort gestanden wer / dann vnfahl vnd
auff der Seyten / da die Ruina das
Kirchen zu Sant Johann Wasser / so
gestanden vnd auff einem durch dises thal
Berglen erbawt ward / ist es die Mera
nidriger als anderstwo / also genandt /
das das Wasser oder der verschlossen
Fluß / die Mera genandt worden / vnd
daselbst seinen lauff gericht bey zweyen
/ das es alles auff Stunden
derselbigen verharret.

Allhie zu Cleuen ist sehr
grosser
schröcken
entstanden / vnd die gantze
Nacht ander
vnglück
erwartet vnd besorget
worden / aber
Gottlob / hat
solliches
Wasser selbst
den weg
gemacht / also
das Gott ferner
nimmer straffen
will / allhie
mehrens gefahr
nicht zu
besorgen / Gott
der Allmächtig
verleyhe das
wir sollichem
seinem
erschröcklichen
Zoren / mögen
zu warer Büß
bekehrt vnd
bewegt werden
/ damit wir
jhm in die
Ruthen fallen /
auff das Er vns
nicht in der
gleichen seinem
grimmen
blötlich
auffraffe / vmb
Christi seines
lieben Sohns
willen / Amen.

**Esaias am 5. Capittel.**

Ein Volck das
nach deß Herren
Wort /

Wie Gott in dem
Propheten spricht /

Ja durch Erdtbidem
blötlich sterben /

Ach das

Wandlet
Durch
wir nit

Erdt an
Esaiam
also

allem
vns
verderben

Ort /
bericht /
/

Das bewart
Gottes Zoren
So last vnd diß

Gott vor vil
angezündt /
schröcklich

beyspil /
Vnfahl / Vber ein Hertzlich
Aber Volck betrachten
ein das sich offen und
Volck versünd vil /
welches / nach
zu mahl In eygnem dein Gnade
/ willen thut bitten wir /
In sicherheit fortfahren / Wend ab
Lebet dahin / Ohn das vbel
Haben forcht vor der
zu der die Thür /
Büß sterben Vnd das wir
keinen vor den heut den tag
sin / Jahren.
Ob denen Er wird sie in anheben /
schwebt das sein grimm
Vnglück bezalen /
groß / Das vber sie
Werden vber die
auch der Berg
der
seiner einfallen
Straff /
seiner
nicht
loß /

Gedruckt zu Augspurg / bey Lucas Schultes / In verlegung
Daniel Mannesser Kupfferstecher.

Text- und Sachkommentar (Wikisource)

1. ↑ Piuro
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