

The early months of 1981 saw a series of earthquakes, of varying magnitude, shake the Greek mainland. The epicentre of this seismic activity seems to have been the Gulf of Corinth, to the west of Athens and Attica. Although some lives were lost and much property damaged (including the Parthenon), the people of Greece were spared the horrible sufferings of their Italian neighbours, who had earlier experienced massive destruction in the area around Naples. These outbreaks of earthquake activity serve to remind us of the very unstable nature of the Mediterranean region.

This instability also existed in the ancient world, and the early Greeks did at times suffer fearfully from the ravages of earthquakes. Then, as now, much activity was centered in the Gulf of Corinth. Indeed, the year 373 B.C. saw one of the worst such natural disasters ever to strike the classical world. We today are fortunate to possess a graphic account of what happened in the history written by Diodorus Siculus:

Great earthquakes occurred in the Peloponnese accompanied by tidal waves which engulfed the open country and cities in a manner past belief; for never in the earlier period had such disasters befallen Greek cities, nor had entire cities along with their inhabitants disappeared as a result of some divine force wreaking destruction and ruin upon mankind. The extent of the destruction and ruin was increased by the time of its occurrence - for the earthquake did not come in the daytime when it would have been possible for the sufferers to help themselves, but the blow came at night, so that when the houses crashed and crumbled under the force of the shock, the population, owing to the darkness and to the surprise and bewilderment occasioned by the event, had no power to struggle for life.

The majority were caught in the falling houses and annihilated, but as day returned some survivors dashed from the ruins and, when they thought they had escaped the danger, met a greater and still more incredible disaster: for the sea rose to a vast height, and a wave towering even higher washed away and drowned all the inhabitants and their native lands as well. Two cities in Achaia bore the brunt of this disaster, Helice and Bura, the former of which had, as it happened, before the earthquake held first place among the cities of Achaia. (15.48, Sherman translation)

Here was a devastating natural disaster responsible for the abrupt ruin of two major cities, and it is interesting to note that, to the ancient mind, this event appeared to be a result of some divine force wreaking destruction and ruin upon mankind. In fact, according to Pausanias, it was common belief that Poseidon, the god of earthquakes and the sea, had become very angry at the inhabitants of Helice. Apparently, some suppliants had fled into the famous temple of Poseidon in that city to take refuge, but were dragged away from the holy place by the people of the area; to punish such an offence, the god inflicted the earthquake upon Helice.

Today, of course, earth scientists offer a quite different explanation for the earthquake activity of this region, one that has to do with the movements of the earth's tectonic plates in the Mediterranean basin. But in a world in which the gods were often thought to behave in rather violent ways, it is no wonder that the victims of the 373 B.C. disaster looked to Poseidon's wrath for an explanation of their suffering. After all, even the heroic Odysseus felt the sting of that god's lasting anger as he struggled for many years to return home to Ithaca after the Trojan War.

One can only hope that growing scientific understanding of how the earth works will someday lead to an ability to control or prevent such terrible catastrophes.