UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

# DISASTERS AS USUAL

## The Public Life of Recurring Floods in Dresden

PhD thesis 2017 · Kristoffer Albris

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Kristoffer Albris

PhD Thesis

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The Public Life of Recurring Floods in Dresden

Department of Anthropology
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Copenhagen
Changing Disasters Research Programme

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Front cover photo used with permission, showing the village of Gohlis during the 2002 floods in Dresden.


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*Kristoffer Albris*
*Copenhagen*
*January 2017*

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# Introduction

*In 2002, they talked about a hundred-year flood. Then in 2006, it came again. Then in 2013. Again! Now, nobody talks about hundred-year floods. That is a problem.*
- Günter Koch, Gohlis, Dresden.

In June 2014, the Technical University of Dresden held a conference on disasters and cultural heritage protection. I participated. As the final event of the conference, the organisers had arranged a tour of Dresden's floodwall defence systems in the city centre (*Altstadt*). It was a warm and humid day, almost like an omen of the scorching temperatures that the local valley climate can produce in July and August. Since rain had been scarce in the region, the Elbe was at an extremely low level. It was difficult to imagine what the river had looked like almost a year ago to the day in 2013, when the most recent flood inundated parts of Dresden.

The organisers had asked representatives from the Dresden municipality to show us the flood protection systems that the city had installed and upgraded over the course of the last decade. The protection walls run along the banks of the Elbe in the Altstadt, whose buildings make up the famous city skyline that earned Dresden the nickname "Florence on the Elbe" (*Elbflorenz)*. Although many of these structures were rebuilt after the bombing of Dresden in 1945, the city centre is still cherished as a heritage site. The 2002 floods, which no one had expected, flooded parts of the baroque city centre and resulted in large-scale restructuring of technical solutions to keep water out; this was one of the reasons heritage experts had come to Dresden for the conference.

The elaborate system of walls and gates prevents the city centre and the rest of Dresden from being inundated, leaving only the riverbanks, where tourist steamer ships lie at anchor, to be flooded. Since 2002, the city has invested in a massive system of mobile barriers that can be inserted, unfolded, or installed onto the sandstone walls when the risk of flooding is imminent. One of the bigger installations is a massive steel gate on hinges located by a track and field stadium to the west of the city centre. As our guides open it, they make sure that no one is trapped behind it. Once it begins to open, it cannot be stopped. Next to the gate, a wall hides another gate that slides out and closes off the street that leads into the city, preventing water from flowing into the city centre and the surrounding neighbourhoods. Each year, the authorities run drills to make sure the walls operate as they should and that they can seal off the city from threatening water masses.

Across the Altstadt, various solutions of these sorts, big and small, have been installed with almost surgical precision. In some cases, huge steel or sandstone gates are rolled out. In other cases, small mobile steel plates are connected to the permanent sandstone walls that once fortified the city against attacking enemies. "It's like a game of Tetris," a conference participant exclaimed as one of the guides showed us how the steel extensions are fitted onto the sandstone walls. The municipal representative explained in a proud voice the details of how long it takes to unpack all of these elements and install them. "Dresden," he said, "can be made flood proof in a matter of hours." The point is to have these systems ready to activate as quickly as possible, but without them being noticed in the day-to-day life of this busy tourist part of the city, the guide from the municipality explains to us. They have been fitted and adjusted into the architectural design of the city's riverfront, enabling the aesthetics of the city centre to reflect the picturesque image of Dresden as the riverine capital of Saxony. It is as if there exist two versions of the city at the same time: one for normal times, and one for the floods.

As the tour moves along, I strike up a conversation with an American professor who gave a presentation on the first day of the conference on Asian heritage sites and disaster risks. After discussing his talk, he asks me what I am doing here in Dresden. I tell him that I have come to do fieldwork to study the effects of the floods on local politics. He nods and says, "Oh, that sounds interesting. This is a much-debated topic after Hurricane Katrina in the United States. That was a huge event. This here in Dresden, this is more like your usual disaster."

## Dresden under Water

Dresden, a medium-sized German city with a population of approximately 500,000 people and the capital of the Free State of Saxony, is no stranger to floods. As a riverine city situated along the banks of the Elbe, inundation has historically been an unpleasant fact of life for the population (Fügner 2002). As the city grew to become the cultural and economic centre of Saxony in the 18th and 19th centuries, population numbers increased and physical settlements expanded along the river, making it one of Germany's largest cities in terms of land area (Landeshauptstadt Dresden 2015). This made more inhabitants vulnerable to floods, and they devastated the city on several occasions in the period between 1784 and 1941 (Dresden Umweltamt 2012; Poliwoda 2007); there were also less damaging and smaller events that reached the seven-meter mark at the central measuring station by the Elbe in the Altstadt. During the 19th and early 20th century, massive flood canals, wide retention fields, and elaborate dike systems were built to make sure that flood waters could be controlled and diverted away from the city centre (Adam 2001; Korndörfer 2001).

Then something strange happened. Although water levels in the Elbe still reached considerable heights every year, the sixty years after 1941 did not produce any flood event that overran the city's flood defences. Dresden experienced what historian Christian Pfister (2011) calls a *disaster memory gap*, during which the collective memory of what floods entail in terms of inundation and material damage faded out of public awareness and memory (see Figure 1).

Then, in August 2002, heavy rain for weeks on end caused the Elbe to reach the highest water levels on record, and large parts of the city, including parts of the baroque city centre, were inundated. Few people in Dresden had conceived of the possibility of an event on this scale, which revealed significant vulnerabilities in many areas of the city (Korndörfer et al. 2010:291). In hindsight, it was called a hundred-year event, and one not likely to occur again anytime soon. In 2005 and 2006, two minor floods once again threatened the city, although they left most parts dry (Dresden Umweltamt 2012). Then, in June 2013, the third-largest flood event on record broke the dikes in parts of the city. Dresden had again experienced an event that was only supposed to occur once every hundred years. Now, those tasked with dealing with floods in the city face a conundrum: if events once thought to be rare are now occurring several times in a decade, how should Dresden prepare for a "new normal" one-hundred-year event? How far does one go in protecting the city against a future that does not fit past statistical projections?