

RESEARCH ARTICLES

From City to Lake: Flood Legends, Place-Making and Changing Landscapes

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As displayed by several myths and legends, water is a powerful means of destruction and reconfiguration of natural and human landscapes. This is especially evident when a flood is sent by god(s) or supernatural beings to punish sinful people and corrupt cities. Generally, this kind of catastrophe brings about the disappearance of a whole human community and the resulting transformation of a certain place. However, it may also happen that one or few persons, because of their piety or righteousness, are spared by the divine anger, sometimes along with their houses or something else. The present work starts from a discovery on the field of a local legend concerning Lake Varano, a coastal body of water in the Gargano peninsula (Apulia, Italy). According to this legend, Lake Varano would be the outcome of an ancient flood, sent by God to punish a prosperous and corrupt city, Uria, once flourishing in the place of the lake. Just like other more famous floods, this local flood is meant to mark a transition between an evil past, embodied by the sunken Uria, and a good present, embodied by a little church, formerly the house of the only survivor, Nunzia, a pious woman. As part of the broader corpus of flood narratives, this legend and the other ones here considered distinguish themselves as featuring a lake, which physically and symbolically shapes and connotes the religious, historical and geographical identity of a local community. Starting from Lake Varano's origin legend, a structural and thematic analysis is conducted on a number of similar legends, in order to identify, classify and understand a particular category of narrative folklore, characterized by a significant interplay between water (flood- and lake-lore), history (ancient cities vanished), religious beliefs (retributive gods) and moral principles (evil and good). Eventually, such a comparative work will lead back to Lake Varano's legend, because of the peculiarity of its heroine; unlike all the other survivors, who are passively rescued from a flood, Nunzia plays indeed an active part in the drama, thus resulting a co-author, with the flood, of a local place-making, that is the main concern of these legends.

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Introduction

Water is a primordial element in the history of the world and for humankind in particular. It is the primary source of life on the Earth. Undoubtedly, we cannot live without water, then we need to be able to access to the places – rivers, lakes, springs, aquifers etc. – where we can find a sufficient quantity of this vital liquid. However, all the more in times marked by climate change, water can also be one of the most lethal forces in nature, even a dreadful source of death. Both its lack and its excess can have a catastrophic impact on human life and on any kind of social and economic organization. While drought deprives plants, animals and humans of something essential to their own existence, a flood is a destructive event, able to destroy anything on its way. Therefore, depending on its size, a flood can wipe out a more or less extended part of a territory, including human settlements. As a consequence, a flood is also a powerful means of landscape re-shaping, something that changes, in a more or less enduring way, the natural and anthropic features of a territory.

Hence, it is not surprising that nearly all cultures and religions in the world include founding myths regarding floods – one of the “recurrent themes in myths and mythmaking,” according to Kluckhohn (1959, pp. 271–272) – which usually tell and explain the catastrophic end of an ancient world, as well as the birth of a new world, rising from the ashes of the previous one. Actually, according to Utley (1960, p. 68, as cited in Peschel, 1971, p. 116), “deluge and creation myths are frequently linked, since the flood’s destruction often leads to a kind of purified creation.” In these stories the flood is therefore conceived as an exemplary and definitive punishment inflicted by a deity to an evil, corrupt, sinful mankind, as a rule “in order to bring about a return to the ‘neglected’ or ‘forgotten’ values of the culture” (Peschel, 1971, p. 123): the Greek myth of Deucalion and Pyrrha, the *Genesis*’ Great Flood, and the deluge in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* are three remarkable examples (for an overview see Dundes, 1988; Witzel, 2010).

While these renowned myths, like many others less known, can be regarded, at least theoretically, as “worldwide” or “global” flood accounts, we find in folklore a wide variety of legends concerning “local” floods (see Pilotte, 2019); they are correlated with the sinking and disappearance of an ancient city, town, village, but also of single men or women. More specifically, to come to the subject of this article, a number of legends all around the world connect the origin of a lake with the sinking and disappearance of a human settlement, whose remains are often reported as still lying at the bottom of the lake itself.

I bumped into such kind of narrative during field research in Gargano (Apulia, Italy). I was documenting a religious festival concerning a miraculous crucifix, enshrined in a little church overlooking Lake Varano, when I heard the story of Uria and Nunzia for the first time. Basically, it was the story of a city submerged by a lake (Varano) and of the only inhabitant spared by the flood. I felt so much interested in this local legend that I decided

to deepen my knowledge of it, first of all by searching for all the available written sources and framing them in the local geography, history and culture, as will be expounded in the next paragraph. Later on, in order to widen my research from this particular case to a general overview, and then to set up a structural and comparative analysis, I started to search for and collect local legends sharing the theme and the motifs characterizing the legend of Lake Varano; the results of such a work will be discussed in the third paragraph.

To assemble my narrative collection I have followed three main paths: the Thompson's *Motif Index* (Thompson, 1955–1958), whose bibliographic references attached to the considered motifs have been my first sources; a systematic survey on a number of single lakes – starting from Italy – aimed at identifying possible flood legends concerning them; a monumental collection (719 pieces) entitled “Les villes englouties” (literally “The swallowed cities”), published by the French scholar René Basset in the *Revue des traditions populaires* from 1891 to 1919, from which I have only drawn the legends pertaining cities swallowed by lakes. In sum, I have been able to find and scrutinize, to date, 87 narratives coming from all the continents, though most of them are from Europe, first and foremost from central Europe.

What makes all the collected stories comparable is the fact that they are about a lake – or a similar body of water – which takes up a place formerly occupied by some people and their dwellings. What is told, therefore, is not merely the destruction of a human settlement, but its replacement with a lake: water for land, so to say. Consequently, the lake is to be considered an outcome rather than a cause of the flood. Nonetheless, in many of these legends, just like in the abovementioned myths, one or more individuals are spared by the flood's outburst, as well as their houses and/or a little piece of land, if only they stay there during the flood. Accordingly, these individuals stand as the only survivors of a vanished human community, while their own places appear as the only surviving features of a former landscape.

In other words, we are going to deal with narratives which generally reinterpret a natural occurrence – the birth of a lake – from a religious and moral perspective; they explain a geographical transformation – and, at the same time, a historical evolution, related to the collapse of an ancient settlement and the possible origin of a later one – in terms of a conflictual relationship between the human and the divine on a local scale. Basically, we are at the intersection of a historical legend, based on “a remarkable real happening, natural phenomenon, historical event, or murder,” and an etiological legend, whose purpose is “the objectification of an existing phenomenon that demands explanation” (Bausinger as cited in Dégh, 2001, pp. 38–39; see also Honko, 1989; Thompson, 1946, pp. 7–10). Ultimately, such a religious and moral explanation of a local event, being a form of “place-making” or else “a venerable means of *doing* human history” (Basso, 1996, pp. 5–7), becomes an essential piece in the building and strengthening of a

place-lore and the related sense of identity and belonging of its bearers (cf. Carrassi, 2021, pp. 13–18; Katić, 2015, pp. 24–26; Valk & Sävborg, 2018, pp. 7–13), as will be argued in the last two paragraphs.

Lake Varano, between history and legend

A close correlation between a local environment and a religious tradition is what founds and connotes the narrative tradition concerning Lake Varano, a coastal lake situated in the north of Gargano, an Apulian peninsula (southern Italy) stretching out into the Adriatic Sea. What makes this lake so peculiar – just like the neighbouring Lesina – is the closeness to the sea, from which it is only separated by a thin land strip, Varano's isthmus. This peculiarity, however, is the outcome of a long natural history, a history made of geologic and climatic events which have slowly but strongly transformed the landscape of this area.

As testified by a number of ancient and influential geographers – like Strabo, Pliny the Elder, Ptolemy and Pomponius Mela (see Cannarozzi, 1955, pp. 155–156) – there was a gulf in the place of the current lake, the so-called *Sinus Urias*. This name referred to Uria, an ancient Daunian and then Greek city, whose exact location has been fiercely debated – perhaps because there were more than one Uria (see Cipriani, 1953, pp. 273–279) – but whose historical existence cannot be questioned, as well as its relevance and prosperity, tightly related to the favourable position of its harbour within the homonymous gulf. Despite the scarcity of crucial documents and evidence, it can be rationally inferred that the joint work of sea currents and winds in carrying detritus from the neighbouring rivers' mouths brought about the formation of a sandbar – the current isthmus – which gradually transformed the gulf into a coastal lake – the earliest mention of a *Lacus Bayrano* traces back to 1158, in a papal seal of Adrian IV. Such an event deprived Uria of its main resource, the harbour, and, in addition, caused a swamping of the area and the spread of malaria and similar diseases. These can be considered the objective reasons, perhaps supported by other historical incidents – such as a raid by Goths in the sixth century CE (Laganella, 2003, p. 39) – to explain the decline and abandonment of Uria, or else the vanishing of a great and powerful city and a lake coming into being.

The Apulian bishop and writer Pompeo Sarnelli provides the earliest statement of a religious and moral interpretation of Uria's disappearance and the lake's birth in a historiographic work devoted to the bishops of Siponto (Gargano) published in the late seventeenth century. Actually, in order to explain the origins of three towns belonging to the diocese of Siponto, Sarnelli refers to Uria – which he names Varano – as a city “founded by the mythical king Diomedes with a perimeter of 30 miles, later on sunk because of the blasphemy of its inhabitants and become a lake” (1680, p. 434; all the translations from Italian to English are mine); in so doing, this catholic prelate gave rise to the bad reputation of Uria, henceforth regarded as a pagan and corrupt city, and then deservedly wiped out by a lake. To complete the picture, Sarnelli writes that the surrounding towns of Ischitella, Carpino and

Cagnano were founded by the survivors of such a cataclysm (1680, p. 434; cf. Pacichelli, 1703, p. 120). In the absence of similar documents, this brief note can be considered the most eminent source of an oral tradition that, in the following centuries, has connected the end of Uria and the origin of the lake Varano with a local religious worship, consisting of a miraculous crucifix (as a bearer of rain in times of drought) enshrined in a church (the Annunziata) believed as the house of the only Uria's inhabitant rescued from the flood. The place of a natural catastrophe – and divine punishment – has thus been turned into a sacred and venerated place which is, still today, the cornerstone of a shared identity (Carrassi, 2020).

Such a connection was documented for the first time by Giuseppe Del Viscio, a local scholar, in an exhaustive monograph concerning Uria and its history, archaeology and folklore. Del Viscio (1921, pp. 82–91) identifies three different oral accounts directly related to Uria and its sad fate, all of them identifiable as “religious tales,” according to the ATU Index (Uther, 2004, pp. 750–849); each of them, in addition, is marked by a single character who emblematically embodies the meanings and the values at stake:

1. A pious and pure woman, Nunzia (a clear reference to the Virgin Mary as the Annunciated Lady), while weaving at home, was urged by a supernatural voice (an angel) to escape from the punishment God was inflicting on her city and its wicked inhabitants. She promptly left her job and, peeking over the doorway, realized that the city had been already submerged and the water was now threatening her little house, located on the outskirts of Uria. However, the appearance of Nunzia instantly stopped the flood. Her dwelling was therefore the only place spared by the divine punishment and, from then on, was regarded as a sacred building (ATU 779: Divine rewards and punishments).
2. Among the Urian sinners killed by the divine punishment, a special attention is paid to a depraved priest, whose suffering and restless soul keeps on wandering across the lake and lets out a grave lament similar to a bellow (*vociantaure*, i.e., “the voice of a bull”); this can be read as a legendary explanation of a natural sound produced by the lake during some periods of the year (ATU 831: The dishonest priest).
3. The prince of Uria, a greedy usurer, after having accidentally survived the destruction of his city, was later punished and killed in his mansion, along with his innocent daughter Giulia, by an earthquake sent by God (ATU 837: How the wicked lord was punished).

These same legends are reported by Giuseppe D'Addetta, a later local scholar, in a short work expressly devoted to the coastal lakes of Gargano (1949, pp. 15–16). The only difference concerns the figure of Nunzia, who is presented in the two different variants of “a pure little old woman,” and “a young lover” whose beloved was taken away by the flood; in both cases she is rewarded with the immortality, so that, according to a local tradition, one can still meet her wandering around the lake. In a later work, a heavily edited collection of folk narratives from Gargano, D'Addetta is so fascinated by Nunzia to make her the protagonist of a real folktale – precisely entitled “Nunzia” – which dramatically reworks and expands the original plot. Here Nunzia is both the only survivor and witness of the flood, and the first person to tell and pass on this story (to a little girl who had lost her way), thus acting as the first link of its oral transmission (D'Addetta, 1960, pp. 134–151).

A further and significant development is what we find in a collective guidebook concerning the history, culture and environment of Gargano. The chapter devoted to the town of Ischitella has a paragraph entitled “The Legend of Uria” (Ariano et al., 1988, pp. 228–229). Based on a number of oral retellings collected on the field, basically this version recovers and combines the three accounts provided by Del Viscio, thus giving the legend a uniform and sounder narrative structure. Furthermore, some interesting motifs and details are added which make the story more entertaining and similar to a folktale. To begin, Uria is described as a “large and rich [city], with huge buildings and big marble columns. Ships from all the world docked at its harbour,” while its inhabitants were “spiteful and debauched just like their king [...] after the umpteenth party, they were replete and drunk so as to be sound asleep.” More importantly, as opposed to a pious woman, a wicked king is introduced, whose name Tauro clearly evokes the acoustic phenomenon of *vociantaure* which Del Viscio had ascribed to a depraved priest. The same bellow-like sound is ascribed instead to the weeping of the king on the ruins of his city: “This king was evil and proud and did not believe in God. He had destroyed the temples and killed the priests in order to seize their riches. In his palace there were feasts and banquets all the year.” Nunzia is described as a “very kind, beautiful woman, with golden hair as an angel and eyes like stars.” Furthermore, a crucial motif is added for the denouement of the story, being one of the means by which the flood is stopped: “That night she did not sleep, feeling that something awful was going to happen [...]. Scared, the young woman instinctively threw her ball of thread saying: ‘Lord God, stop it now!’. And water instantly stopped.” The motif of a magic object stopping the flood (D1184.1 Magic ball of thread, and D1549.3 Magic object controls river or lake, in the *Motif-Index*: Thompson, 1955–1958), along with the fact that the only survivor is also the person who stops the flood – in Del Viscio the flood is stopped by the very appearance of Nunzia – is something substantially distinguishing this legend from all the others I have collected. Incidentally, an interesting parallel is in the hagiography of Saint Patrick, where it is said that he cursed and stopped

“a great, unnatural flood” on his way. Additionally, “a small mound with a cross thereon” is still there to mark the place where the saint tarried in the process (Stokes, 1887, p. 139).

Narrative structures and landscape’s reconfiguration

The discovery and the study of this local legend led me, as already said, to search for and analyse other legends about local floods originating a lake – something that, just to mention a significant case, is identified as “a special category of early Irish narrative” and is known under the Gaelic name of *Tomadmann* or “burstings forth” (Carney, 1976, p. 191).

As for the narrative structure of these legends, they have revealed a recurrent combination of some specific motifs: 1) the punishment of impious people and/or the vanishing of a wicked city (A920.1.8 Lake bursts forth to drown impious people; A1018 Flood as punishment; F944.1 City sinks in sea or lake as punishment; Q220 Impiety punished; Q467 Punishment by drowning); 2) the origin of a lake connected with extraordinary events (A920.1.0.1 Origin of a particular lake; A1011 Local deluges; F934 Extraordinary occurrences connected with lakes; Q552.2.1 Land sinks and lake appears as punishment); 3) and the possible surviving of one or more righteous people (Q20 Piety rewarded; Q54 Uprightness rewarded; Q150.1 Rescue from deluge as reward), sometimes matched with the survival of places and/or objects related to them.

Each of these motifs, in the context of a historical, and even more of an etiological legend (see Kabakova, 2013, pp. 5–11; Lecouteux, 2013, pp. 135–137; Oriol, 2013, pp. 32–36), is apt to provide an answer to possible questions deriving from the observation of a local landscape, so as to “give an explanation of the origin of remarkable objects in our vicinity” (Johansen, 1989, p. 184). For instance, to answer two related questions such as ‘How did that lake arise?’ and ‘Why exactly in that place?’, a narrative – and its (primary) narrator (Johansen, 1989, pp. 197–198) – may invoke a local deluge (A1011) and/or an extraordinary precipitation (F962) occurred as a form of punishment (A1018, Q552.2.1) to drown impious people (A920.1.8, Q220), so that an ancient city sank in the lake (F944.1). A subsequent, logical question might be: ‘Was anybody spared by the flood?’ The answer, in this case, may not be univocal, as will be shown below. Often, however, there are one or few individuals who, because of their piety or uprightness, are rescued and survive the flood (Q20, Q54, Q150.1). Eventually, in order to identify a tangible link between the past and the present, the ‘before’ and the ‘after’ the catastrophe, one might ask: ‘Has anything survived to this day?’

Regardless of the persistence of a natural (such as an island in the lake) or an anthropic (such as a building on the lake shore) feature spared by the destructive power of water, the answer to this last question leads us to recognize how a flood, creating a certain lake, draws in fact a sort of moral as well as historical geography of the area where it occurred. What comes out is a symbolic reassessment of the natural and anthropic space, based on the dialectic pairs of ‘under’ (or heading towards the earth) and ‘above’

(or heading towards the sky) the lake, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ it (cf. Lotman, 1977, pp. 217–218, 229–231). In other words, the lake, taking the place of a previous human settlement, gives rise to a physical boundary separating, and at the same time linking – because water is a liquid, transparent substance through which one can see and even pass – a negative and vanished past, embodied by the sunken remains of an ancient, wicked city, and a positive and still existing present, embodied by the feature(s), often religiously connoted, having survived the flood and being more or less intact to this day, and/or built after the cataclysm. Moving from under to above, from inside to outside the lake, a journey is made from the past to the present of a local community, whose historical evolution is thus emblematically reenacted and mirrored in the signs characterizing the landscape (see Ryden, 1993, p. 39). This is something patently discernible in the local legend of Varano: Uria, the ancient, wicked city lies under and inside the lake, while the house of the pious Nunzia, later turned into a church, is located above and outside the lake, as well as the towns arisen after the flood.

Nonetheless, if we scrutinize the narratives I have collected, such a symbolic reassessment of the landscape is not always an explicit feature, but rather something one can imply from the state of things deriving from the flood. This means that the motifs concerning the drowning of impious people – one of the motifs that “occur again and again” in folklore (Johansen, 1989, p. 184) – and the resulting coming into being of a lake are the basic elements making up the structure of these narratives. Surviving people and, to a lesser degree, surviving places or objects stand as plot’s complementary, though quite common, structural elements.

Hence, taking as a reference the Tale-Type Index (Uther, 2004), perhaps the type ATU 779: Divine rewards and punishments can be an appropriate umbrella-category under which gathering all our flood legends, based as they are on the interpretation of a natural event – the birth of a lake – in terms of a conflictual relationship between the human and the divine.

After all, if we scrutinize more thoroughly the collected narratives, they can be classified according to three main subtypes, on the basis of the motifs present in the plot:

1. [A1011/A920.1.0.1 + A1018/A920.1.8];
2. [A1011/A920.1.0.1 + A1018/A920.1.8] + [Q20, Q54, Q150.1];
3. [A1011/A920.1.0.1 + A1018/A920.1.8] + [Q20, Q54, Q150.1] + piece of land/building/object spared by the flood.

Furthermore, some complementary motifs can be found in all these subtypes, such as the visible remains of a city under the lake (F725), and audible remnants in form of moaning ghosts (E402.1.1.2) or underwater ringing bells (cf. Christiansen, 1958, p. 214: “7070ff. Legends about church-

bells [...] when left at the bottom of the sea, river or a lake, they can be heard lamenting their fate”). Another set of motifs is related to the concept of hospitality (H1564), which is usually tested by gods, saints or spirits disguised as beggars (K1811.1). Accordingly, the flood is interpreted as a punishment against inhospitable people (Q292.1), while those who prove themselves hospitable are rewarded and rescued from the flood (Q45, Q150.1, Q151.6).

For the purpose of exemplifying, illustrating and comparing the three subtypes identified above, I provide in the following three sections a commented selection of some of the most significant legends coming from my collection.

Subtype 1

This subtype includes those legends where the punishment strikes everybody with no exception, so that nothing survives of what existed in the place of the lake. For instance, Téofilo Braga (1886, p. 44, as cited in Basset, 1891–1919, pp. 495–496; this and the following translations from French are mine) reports that the Portuguese town of Valverde “would have been destroyed and would lie at the bottom of Lake Carregal, as a punishment for the callousness of its inhabitants towards the Virgin Mary, who had passed through the town disguised as a poor woman begging for alms.”

According to Adalbert Kuhn (1859, p. 292, as cited in Basset, 1904, p. 442), next to Neuhaus, in Lower Saxony, there was a city swallowed by Lake Balksee “because of the insolence of its inhabitants, guilty of making blasphemous jokes about God.” Curiously, associated with the sinful city, “an enormous bull named *Subull*” would lie at the bottom of the lake; its mighty bellow, similar to a thunder, can be heard when the lake is frozen.

A more articulate and dramatic legend was collected by C.S. Burne (1883, pp. 64–65) in the Shropshire (England): “Many years ago a village stood in the hollow which is now filled up by the mere [a small lake]. But the inhabitants were a wicked race, who mocked God and His priest.” Here, however, there was also a good person, an old priest who “earnestly warned them that God would punish such wickedness as theirs by some sudden judgment, but they laughed him to scorn.” As predicted by the priest: “The rains fell that December in immense quantities. The mere was swollen beyond its usual limits, and all the hollows in the hills were filled to overflowing.” Again, the priest urged the villagers to take the proper measures, but they continued to ignore his warnings. On Christmas Eve, the priest was able to summon a few people to attend Midnight Mass. Nonetheless: “The night was stormy, and the rain fell in torrents, yet this did not prevent the little flock from coming to the chapel. The old servant of God had already begun the holy sacrifice, when a roar was heard in the upper part of the valley.” Sadly, this extreme act of faith could not save the little flock and the priest himself from the general destruction: “In a few moments more the whole building was washed away, and the mere, which had burst its mountain

barrier, occupied the hollow in which the village had stood.” As an audible remnant of this tragedy, “on Christmas Eve, just after midnight, you may hear the Sanctus bell tolling.”

Likewise, according to a Prussian legend, in the place of the current Lake Sbonkowo, in Poland, there was a village whose inhabitants were

haughty people who mocked the poverty instead of taking pity on it. One day, an old, sick woman, begging for food and water, was recklessly rejected. Therefore she cursed the village and its inhabitants [...]. Immediately that village was swallowed by the ground and a big lake appeared in its place. (von Tettau & Temme, 1837, p. 236, as cited in Basset, 1906, p. 380)

However, a future salvation is suggested by the final remark that, at the bottom of the lake, you can see those wicked people walking in procession around the church in order to beg for God’s mercy.

These legends, along with many and many others, show that there are two most common motivations invoked to justify a (divine) punishment: “the inhabitants’ impious lives” and “one or several poor people having been denied a request” (Johansen, 1989, p. 199). However, there are also floods not originated by the people’s impiety or by their lack of generosity; they are caused, more prosaically – and tragically – by the carelessness of a single person, which has a deadly consequence for the people living in the place overwhelmed by the water. For instance, in Britain and Ireland:

The origin of many a lake is due to the carelessness of the keeper of a well [...] who omitted to replace the cover: the water continued to flow and inundated the country around until the cover was put back again. (Williams, 1963, p. 374; see also pp. 364-365).

Subtype 2

As regards this subtype, basically it includes the classic myths of destruction and re-creation: actually, in the biblical account of the Great Flood as well as in those reported in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and in the Greek mythology there are, on one hand, a mankind killed for their sins, on the other hand, a few people – Noah and his family, Utnapishtim and his family, and Deucalion and Pyrrha, respectively – spared by the divine rage in order to give rise to a new mankind.

On the smaller scale of a local flood, the following three examples present individuals who save themselves thanks to their hospitality toward a divine or sacred wayfarer; consequently, they are warned in time to leave their house which is involved in the general destruction so as not to be killed by the upcoming catastrophe. Unlike the abovementioned mythical heroes, however, these survivors are not entrusted with any palingenetic task: they are just

the only good individuals among the evil people of an irremediably lost community. I have purposely selected three items belonging to three different religious traditions, in order to highlight the cross spread of this subtype.

According to an Ethiopic legend, Jesus Christ himself, begging for water in the village of Tallaki, was rejected by all its inhabitants except by an old woman. As a reward, Jesus ordered the woman to reach at night a neighbouring mountain: "The next day the village had been replaced by a lake still existing" (d'Abbadie, 1890, p. 63, as cited in Basset, 1893, p. 479).

Another divine figure characterizes a legend from India, where is told that

Parmeswar [the Hindu god Shiva] was wandering about the earth in the form of a poor man and came to the country over which flows the Colair Lake. It was then a highly prosperous land wholly given up to pleasure. The god ask for a drink, but no one would give him any water, and he was repulsed from door to door by the pleasure-seekers. He was to go away when a poor woman not only gave him some water to drink but also to wash his hands and feet. Then she brought him some food. Pleased at her hospitality the god asked her to follow him, and she followed. And lo! the country they had left was a flaming fire. The fire burnt on till there was a great hollow in the ground and into the hollow the waters flowed and formed a great lake. (Venkataswami, 1901, p. 200)

As in the biblical account of Sodom and Gomorrah, here the divine punishment is carried out by fire instead of water, but the result is the same: a lake replaces a human settlement and just one 'holy' person is saved from the cataclysm.

An intriguing legend, featuring no less than Mohammed, the founder of Islam, is related to the origin of the Dead Sea, a salt lake located between Jordan, Palestine and Israel. This time the eminent wayfarer had been properly hosted by a landlord, whose ostensible generosity was deceitful though: he had announced to offer his guest a lamb, but what was prepared was in fact a dog. The landlord's wife, however, secretly informed Mohammed so when the main course was served, Mohammed "seized his cane and stroke the edge of the dish: instantly the dog came out from the dish and started barking." Then he anathematized all that region, but at the same time instructed the woman on what to do to save herself and her child. Shortly after the woman saw some water flowing from the bottom of a barn and that was the sign predicted by Mohammed. Therefore "she took her son and ran to the mountain. While she was rushing off, water increasingly flowed from the barn, so as to flood all the cursed region and give rise to the Dead Sea." However, like Lot's wife in the biblical episode of Sodom and Gomorrah, the surviving woman turned her head to watch what was happening, thus violating a Mohammed's warning - as remarked by

Johansen (1989, p. 184) “the prohibition against looking back” is one of the most common tabu-motifs - and she was then literally petrified by her own curiosity (Abel, 1909, p. 593, as cited in Basset, 1911, pp. 53-54).

In contrast, in the Estonian Folklore Archives one can find no less than 73 legends connecting the coming into being of a lake with the breaking of a tabu, mainly “the marriage of a brother and sister” (Metsvahi, 2018, p. 369). Accordingly, the sinking under a lake of a castle, a church or a house is traced back to such a misdeed. The fate of the sinners and their guests varies depending on the moment the sinking occurred, whether during or after the wedding (Metsvahi, 2018, p. 369). Nevertheless, a clear example of the subtype 2 is in the earliest printed version of a legend concerning the origin of Lake Valgjärv: “The landlord and his sister received dispensation for marriage and married each other.” An adverse uncle was persuaded to agree and attend the marriage. However, a supernatural voice reminding of the angel’s one warning to Nunzia rescued the uncle: “On the evening of the wedding the uncle heard a voice that admonished him and told him to hurry away. After his escape the storm started, the house sank and the lake appeared to replace it” (Metsvahi, 2018, pp. 369–370).

Subtype 3

In the legends belonging to the third subtype, the lake is not the only heritage left by a local flood. Together with one or more surviving individuals, something else is spared by the supernatural rage, so that a physical trace, as well as a narrative one, is left. What is left, in fact, is a physical trace emphasized by a narrative in order to disclose a supposed former state of things, or else to identify a link between the past and the present, thus providing material to that “place-making” which “construct(s) history itself” by stories (Basso, 1996, p. 7).

Generally speaking, the spared places are related to the survivors, often being their own houses or perhaps the spot where they were during the flood. Accordingly, unlike the survivors of the subtype 2, these ones must not necessarily escape to save themselves. However, we can also find objects related to the survivors, such as the cradle-shape stone left on the shore of the lake replacing the former city of Lourdes in France, where a poor widow with her child and mother were saved (Bladé, 1886, pp. 147–148, as cited in Basset, 1897, p. 562), or the cradle itself containing a newborn, the only survivor of a Welsh legend about the origin of Lake Llangorse (Trevelyan, 1909, p. 10), or even a psaltery and a bridal crown in a Danish legend, but in this case the objects are related to the only victims, two spouses, of a storm originating a lake (Kristensen, 1892, n. 1729).

Nevertheless, the most frequent narratives are those featuring a place rescued from a flood. Starting from the Greek legend of Philemon and Baucis, whose cabin, together with their life, is the only thing preserved from a punishment inflicted by Jupiter on an inhospitable city. Like the house of Nunzia, that cabin is turned into a temple by the god himself (see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VIII, vv. 616-724).

In a legend from Yorkshire, the inhospitable inhabitants of a village, Simmerdale, are contrasted with a Quaker woman, as if the story wanted to distinguish a true religiousness from a false one. Furthermore, the person who knocks in vain on all the village's doors, and is only fed by the Quaker woman, is a witch. Therefore, the punishment and the related exception is inflicted by means of a spell:

Having finished her repast, she [the witch] rose and waved an ash twig over the village, saying: Simmerdale, Simmerdale, Simmerdale, sink, / Save the house of the woman who gave me to drink. When the witch had said these words the water rose in the valley and covered the village, except the old woman's house. Simmer Water is now a peaceful lake. (Addy, 1895, p. 61)

In the place of Lake Santo, in Trentino (northern Italy), there was formerly a wealthy parish whose inhabitants, including a rich parson, had become so arrogant and insensitive to repulse a poor man begging for alms. Only a very poor widow with many children gave him a piece of bread. Then the beggar said to the widow: "This night you will hear a heavy rumble in the village: don't be afraid, but pray and don't look out from the window." After a stormy night, the day after

the widow, staying on the threshold of her cabin, discovered with great surprise that all the landscape was changed. The village had been swallowed and in its place there was a dark lake; only her little house was untouched on the shore. (Ritter von Alpenburg, 1857, pp. 230–231, as cited in Basset, 1891–1919, pp. 526–527)

Another woman is the only righteous person in a Chinese city renowned for its wickedness:

In a vision of the night it was revealed to her that the city and neighbourhood would be destroyed by water [...]. Like Jonah at Nineveh, the woman [...] walked up and down the streets of the city, warning all of the coming calamity. She was laughed at and looked upon as mad by the careless people.

Unlike the other stories, this chosen one, not by chance compared to the biblical Jonah, tries to save her compatriots too, but her efforts are useless, then:

she fled from the city [...]. Before many hours had passed, however, the face of the sky darkened, a mighty earthquake shook the country-side, there was a great subsidence of the earth's surface, and the waters of the Yangtzu River flowed into the hollow, burying the city and villages out of sight. But a spot of ground on which the good woman stood, after

escaping from the doomed city, remained at its normal level, and it stands to-day in the midst of the lake. (Werner, 1922, pp. 405–406)

A final example comes from Connecticut (United States), where the origin of a lake is related to a clash between two Indian tribes:

This treachery the Great Spirit avenged soon after, when the Nipmucks had assembled for a pow-wow, with accessory enjoyments, in the grassy vale where Mashapaug Lake now reflects the charming landscape [...]. In the height of the revel the god struck away the foundations of the hills, and as the earth sank, bearing the offending men and women, waters rushed in and filled the chasm, so that every person was drowned, save one good old woman beneath whose feet the ground held firm. Loon Island, where she stood, remains in sight to-day. (Skinner, 1896, pp. 37–38)

The last two stories are perhaps the most significant in terms of place-making and re-shaping of the landscape, since the flood has created a lake but also an island within it. Standing in as a material, visible vestige of a vanished land and of a vanished age, such an island also acts as a tangible and permanent reference to the religious and moral meaning of a local legend. Such a special meaning is, in turn, what identifies an otherwise insignificant piece of land.

In order to provide a broader and comprehensive overview, I have drafted a synoptic table ([Fig. 1](#)) in which the legends scrutinized above are gathered, along with some others taken from my collection as representative of the three subtypes. The comparison is based on an analysis for key motifs: the way each local flood occurred, the identity of those who were punished, the identity of the person(s) rescued (only subtypes 2 and 3), and the thing(s) not sunk by the flood (only subtype 3).

Coming back to Varano

Having covered such a long and worldwide journey through the flood/lake-lore, we can now go back to the Lake Varano's legend, in order to identify and appreciate what makes it something slightly but significantly different from all the legends I have collected and analysed. As belonging to the subtype 3, this local legend is inherently characterized by a greater number of motifs and a more complex meaning, being at the same time a story of destruction and regeneration, of death and rebirth. Its peculiarity, however, clearly comes out if we focus on the protagonist, Nunzia. Through her agency she preserves a little piece of a vanishing land and community, thus enabling a historical transition from an earlier, somehow mythical stage, embodied by the pagan and corrupt city of Uria, to a new stage seen as a religious and moral progress, inaugurated by the woman's piousness and epitomized in a Christian icon par excellence such as a (miraculous) crucifix.

Figure 1. Synoptic Table.

Which lake came into being	How the flood occurred	Who was punished by the flood	Who was rescued from the flood	What was not sunk by the flood
1) Lake Fucino (Abruzzo, Italy)	not specified	the inhospitable city of Marsiglia	an old, poor widow	/
2)The two lakes of Avigliana (Piedmont, Italy)	not specified	a prosperous but cruel and mean town	an old woman	the old woman's little house
3)Lake Raibl/ Predil (Friuli, Italy)	stormy waters from the mountain	a populated and prosperous but inhospitable town	a family	the family's little house and a little island in the lake
4)Lake Santo (Trentino, Italy)	storm	a thriving but inhospitable parish	a very poor widow with many children	the widow's little house
5)Lake Grandlieu (France)	earthquake	the heathen and depraved city of Herbauges	Saint Martin, a man and his wife (the latter afterward turned into a salt statue)	/
6)Lake of Lourdes (Gascogne, France)	swallowing water	the inhospitable city of Lourdes	a poor widow with her mother and son	a cradle-like stone
7)Lake Semerwater (Yorkshire, England)	a chasm in the land	a great but inhospitable city	a family	the family's little house
8)Lake Semerwater (Yorkshire, England)	water in the valley overflowing	the inhospitable village of Simmerdale	a Quaker woman	the Quaker woman's house
9)Talkin tarn (Yorkshire, England)	storm and earthquake	the prosperous but cruel and inhospitable city of Talkin	a poor widow	the widow's house
10)Elles-mere (Shropshire, England)	water spring overflowing	an old mean woman	/	/
11)Bomere pool (Shropshire, England)	torrential rain making overflow a dam	a heathen and depraved village	/	/
12)Brudsø/ Bride's lake (Denmark)	storm	a cheating woman and her groom	/	a psalter and the bridal crown of the woman
13)Lake Valgjärv (Estonia)	storm	the house of an impious couple	an uncle	/
14)a lake (Lithuania)	lake overflowing	the house of a murderous couple	a guest or one priest	an unspecified object on a floating board
15)Lake Gohlitz (Brandenburg, Germany)	water source overflowing	the impious village of Gohlitz	/	a strip of land in the lake
16)Lake Balksee (Westfalen, Germany)	swallowing water	a blasphemous city	/	/
17)Lake Sbonkowo (Oriental Prussia, Poland)	swallowing land	a cruel village	/	/
18)Lake Luczmin (Oriental Prussia, Poland)	not specified	an impious city	/	/

Which lake came into being	How the flood occurred	Who was punished by the flood	Who was rescued from the flood	What was not sunk by the flood
19)Lake Veen (Netherlands)	flood	a beautiful but wicked and depraved city	a poor man	the man's cabin
20)Lake Llangorse (Brecknockshire, Wales)	flood	a corrupt city	a newborn	a cradle
21)Lake Kenfig (Glamorgan, Wales)	flood	a damned city	/	/
22)Lake Llyn-y-Maes (Cardiganshire, Wales)	storm and flood	a city not converting itself despite the warnings	/	/
23)Lake Bala (Gwynedd, Wales)	water source overflowing	a city not negatively connoted	/	/
24)Lake Neagh (Ireland)	enchanted well bursting forth	town of Liath-muine	three people (including daughter and grandson of king Eochaid)	/
25)Lake Carregal (Portugal)	not specified	the inhospitable city of Valverde	/	/
26)Lake Balaton (Hungary)	water pouring out from a spot once a stone is picked up	the man picking up the stone and his goats	/	/
27)a round pond (Kibwezi, Kenya)	waterfall	an inhospitable village	a woman and her children	/
28)a lake (Ennarea, Ethiopia)	not specified	the inhospitable village of Tallaki	an old woman	/
29)Lake Liang-ti (Hubei, China)	earthquake and river overflowing	a prosperous but wicked city	a woman	a spot of ground in the lake
30)Lake Kutubu (Papua New Guinea)	water overflowing from the roots of a sacred tree	some women drawing water from a sacred tree	(the same women turned into fish)	/
31)Lake Asbold (Irian Jaya, Indonesia)	downpour causing a river flood	a fertile valley with its inhospitable inhabitants	an old woman, her son and a talking dog	/
32)Lake Colair (Central India)	fire creating a chasm where water overflows	a thriving but inhospitable land	a poor woman	/
33)Lake Ba Be (Annam, Vietnam)	water columns	the inhospitable village of Nam Mau	a poor widow with her son	/
34)Dead Sea (Syria)	water overflowing from a barn	the village of H'aditheh and the surrounding area	the wicked landlord's wife (later turned to stone)	/
35)Lake of Langui (Peru)	flood	an inhospitable city	a woman (later turned to stone)	the petrified woman as a rocky sculpture
36)Lake Mashapaug (Connecticut, United States)	collapsing land and the chasm is filled by water	the murderous Indian tribe of Nipmucks	a good old woman	Loon Island, in the lake
37)a lake (Phrygia, Turkey)	flood	an inhospitable village	Philemon and Baucis, an aged couple	the couple's cabin
38)Lake Varano (Gargano, Italy)	flood	the corrupt and blasphemous city of Uria	Nunzia, a pious woman	the woman's house

At the same time, she provides a link, a sense of continuity between what was before and what is after the destructive event. The new towns, founded around the lake, are therefore the concrete and historical proof of the birth of a new (local) world replacing the former one, but linked to it anyway. After all, while the survivors of the other legends rescue themselves escaping from the doomed place or staying passively at home – sometimes unaware of what is happening – Nunzia is able to stop the flood on her own, either by appearing before the advancing water – which “stopped like the river Jordan before the Ark of the Covenant” (Del Viscio, 1921, p. 84) – or throwing a ball of thread and speaking directly to God. This last feat, apparently breaking the tabu of turning themselves to the deity, can be explained through the close identification between Nunzia and the Virgin Mary.

The search for something similar in my narrative corpus, that is an active figure able to stop a flood, leads us nowhere but to an atypical legend from Papua New Guinea, concerning the origin of Lake Kutubu. An atypical one because those who stop the flood – some thirsty women guilty of drawing water from a sacred tree – are at the same time those who have caused the disaster and the only victims of it. In fact, they are turned into fish swimming in the lake. While Nunzia speaks to God, these women address the water: “They knew that they could not escape, so they told the water: ‘*Ira kabero waeo fari fario ibu laik kutbuo Na’a ha bera’s*’. When they said this, the water stayed near the place where had stood and became a lake” (Slone, 2001, p. 622). In so doing these women sacrifice themselves in order to stop the flood and limit its impact on their land.

Likewise, Nunzia opposes the destructive power of a flood, partly limiting its impact on the landscape and preserving something of it (yet including herself); additionally, just through her intervention, she acts as one who cooperates with the flood, since both of them contribute to reconfigure the geography of the place as well as the religious and moral paradigms of its population. From this point of view, Nunzia is perhaps the only flood survivor really comparable to the ancestral heroes of the religious founding myths.

Concluding remarks

Overall, regardless of the role played by the humans involved, whenever a lake is believed to be originated by a flood, its own presence, combined with the belief in something lying at the bottom of it, acts as a visible landscape’s sign of the unpredictable and changeable course of the human things, especially when a natural, extreme event occurs. The religious and moral meaning assigned to such an event tells us how humans try to make sense of sudden and drastic transformations occurring in the places they live in, usually by means of “associations and narratives that assign meaning to otherwise insignificant spots” (Smith, 2008, p. 5). Also, how they can obtain from a destructive occurrence a story meant to explain and even solemnize the coming into being of a different and supposedly better condition for that place itself. In this light, all the legends considered in this article can

be interpreted as a folkloric attempt both to explain a remarkable landscape transformation – generally the drowning of a human settlement by a rising lake – and to establish a sacred sense of place through which “a principle of meaning for the people who live in it, and also a principle of intelligibility for the person who observes it” (Augé, 2009, p. 42) are provided. After all, this is a canonical strategy employed by folklore to create and strengthen a sense of identity and belonging between people and places, between history and geography. As we have seen, the corpus of legends here recognized as a specific category of narrative folklore fulfils such an essential function through the establishment of “relationships between catastrophe and origin tales” (Peschel, 1971, p. 123). In other words, a narrative pattern through which folklore sheds light and makes us reflect on the ambivalent power and meaning of water.

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