

ACTIVITY: Land/ Sea disaster

CASE: GSAF 1909.01.00

DATE: January 1909

LOCATION: Capo San Croce, near Catania, Italy

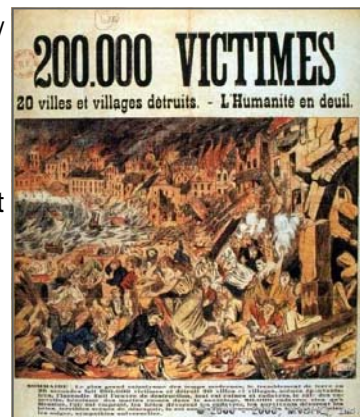
NARRATIVE: Between 05h20 and 05h30 on December 28, 1908, the Monday after Christmas weekend, an earthquake unleashed devastation throughout Sicily. Centered in the Messina Strait, which separates Sicily from Calabria, the quake's magnitude equaled a 7.5 by today's Richter scale. Moments after the quake's first jolt, a devastating tsunami formed, causing forty-foot [13 m] waves to crash down on dozens of coastal cities.

With about 100,000 fatalities the Messina earthquake was the deadliest quake in European history. Many of southern Italy's coastal cities lost half their residents that morning. The population of the city of Messina alone — 150,000 — was reduced to only hundreds; the total death toll throughout Italy was estimated at nearly 200,000. Accounts of shaking and aftershocks were reported throughout Sicily. Signs of the jolt even appeared in Washington, D.C., where the day's crude technology picked up signals of the disaster.

SPECIES INVOLVED: Thousands of bodies were washed out to sea and many were scavenged by sharks in the days and weeks that followed. In early January 1909, remains of three unidentified people (male, female and young girl) were recovered from the gut of a female white shark caught in a fishing net off Capo San Croce, near Catania. It was believed they were drowned in the tsunami following the earthquake.

SOURCES: The Atlanta Constitution, August 15, 1909, page 3
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rescue/peoplevents/pandeAMEX99.html>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1908_Messina_earthquake
et.al

CASE INVESTIGATOR: Chris Moore, Global Shark Accident File





10495-The once beautiful water-front after the earthquake. Digging for bodies, Messina, Sicily. Copyright by Underwood & Underwood. U-116056

NO. 11,891.

EARTHQUAKE KILLS THOUSANDS IN ITALY

Sicily Devastated—Messina Engulfed by Tidal Wave.

20,000 MAY HAVE PERISHED



LE CATASTROPHE SICILIENNE SURVENU DANS LA NUIT DU 27-28 DECEMBRE 1908
MESSINE - Une blessée agonisant sur un brancard improvisé

(Associated Press Service.)

Rome, December 29.—One hundred thousand dead; Messina, in Sicily, and Reggio and a score of other towns in Southern Italy, overwhelmed; the entire Calabrian region laid waste. This is the earthquake's record so far as it is at present known from the reports that are coming slowly into Rome on account of the almost complete destruction of lines of communication to the stricken places.

The death list in Messina ranges from 12,000 to 50,000; that of Reggio, with its adjacent villages, numbering 45,000 people, includes almost the entire population. At Palmi 1,000 are reported dead; at Cassano, 1,000; at Cosenza, 500; and half of the population of Bagbara, about four thousand.

The Monte Leon region has been devastated; and Riposto, Seminaria, San Giovanni, Scilla, Lazzaro and Cannitello, and all other communes and villages bordering on the Straits are in ruins.

FISH SWALLOWS THREE PEOPLE

Dolphin Is Killed Near Messina.

**Upon Opening Its Stomach the
Bodies Were Found—Victims
Were Fleeing From Earth-
quake When Caught, So It Is
Supposed.**

London, August 14.—(Special.)—Instances of the extraordinary voracity and "accommodation" for whatever it swallows of the common shark of the high seas have often been given. Many of these would be almost incredible had not facts been recently attested and put on record by two such authoritative observers as Dr. Condorelli and Dr. Perrando, two distinguished professors of the University of Catania.

The recent terrible earthquake in the Straits of Messina caused the sea, after flooding the beach, to sweep out with its backwash not a few of the citizens of Messina, who happened to be in the neighborhood at that early hour. Of these unfortunates the bodies were never found until, about a month afterwards, on January 26, seven Catanian fishermen, cruising off Cape Santa Croce, netted a medium-sized dolphin and had already dragged it over the boat's gunwale when an enormous shark, rising breast-high out of the water, snapped up their prey in a twinkling and disappeared.

An Astonishing Interior.

After a moment's panic the men went for the sea-robber, and not without difficulty harpooned him and brought him in tow to Catania. Unfortunately they began to dissect him not, as it may be said, by the scientific method desirable in the case of such an uncommon specimen of his kind, but had scarcely opened his stomach when the spectacle before them made them desist in horror. A number of human

limbs, with those of a dog and a cow, lay scattered in the monster's interior!

Notice was immediately given to the sanitary authorities, and these, under the direction of Professor Condorelli and Professor Perrando, had the remains—those of a man, a woman and a child—removed to the mortuary chamber.

Exposed for purposes of recognition, no one among the many relays of Messinese citizens could identify them; but the two medical experts, after a minute and prolonged examination, succeeded in satisfying themselves that the man was about the age of 50 years, his hobnailed shoes and coarse stockings indicating a humble rank; that the woman, of younger age, was of the same condition (to judge from fragments of her dress), while the child might be between five and six years.

Had these poor victims been seized and swallowed alive? or were they already dead when the shark devoured them? Professor Perrando and Professor Condorelli in the elaborate report which they have presented to the Italian Zoological Society have come to the conclusion that the earthquake of December 28 having occurred in the early morning when the inhabitants of Messina were, most of them asleep, and therefore undressed, the corpses found in the shark must have been of those who were either abroad at the time or who living near the shore had at the instant of the shock got out of bed and into their clothes in hot haste and rushing into the open had been swept up and out to sea by the retiring wave.

Swallowed Alive.

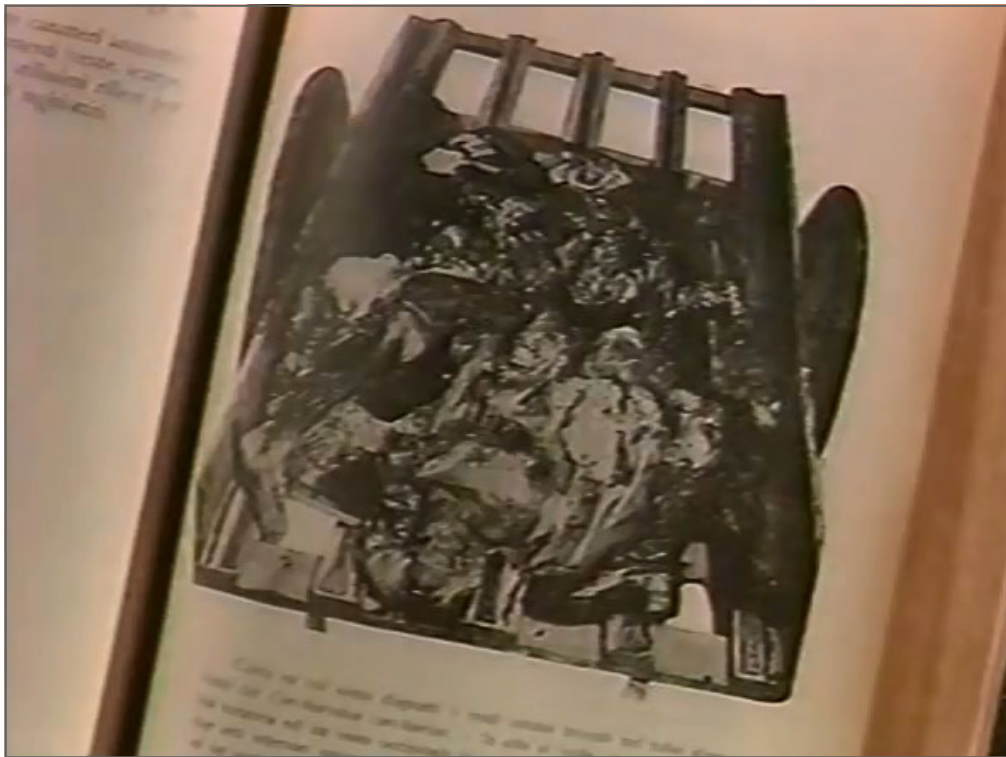
The viscera—steeped as they were in seawater—gave no sign of the ordinary putrefactive processes (the liver, the spleen, and the intestines were in a marvelous state of preservation), and the inference, horrible though it be, seems irresistible that they were swallowed alive!

The report proceeds to describe the size and proportions of the monster—rare indeed, but not unknown in Mediterranean waters. The museum at Catania and other seats of learning in the Two Sicilies contain specimens of it—some of them having been taken after the battle of Aboukir, when a shoal of sharks was seen hovering about during the action. Others, it is said, were sighted in the Levant when, 11 or 12 years ago, the Victoria went down with Admiral Tryon and all hands.

Interesting as the above details are to the nature student, they have also been noted with satisfaction by the theologian, who, whatever other difficulties may beset the narrative of Jonah and the sea-monster (presumably a shark rather than a whale), can appeal to the report of Professor Condorelli and Professor Perrando as proving that capacity to swallow and "accommodate" a human being is not one of them!



The promenade of Messina after the tsunami.



Remains found in the shark

*The photos on the following pages are from Ian Fergusson's mid 1990's *Sharks in the Mediterranean* film and show the human remains on an old wooden cart.*

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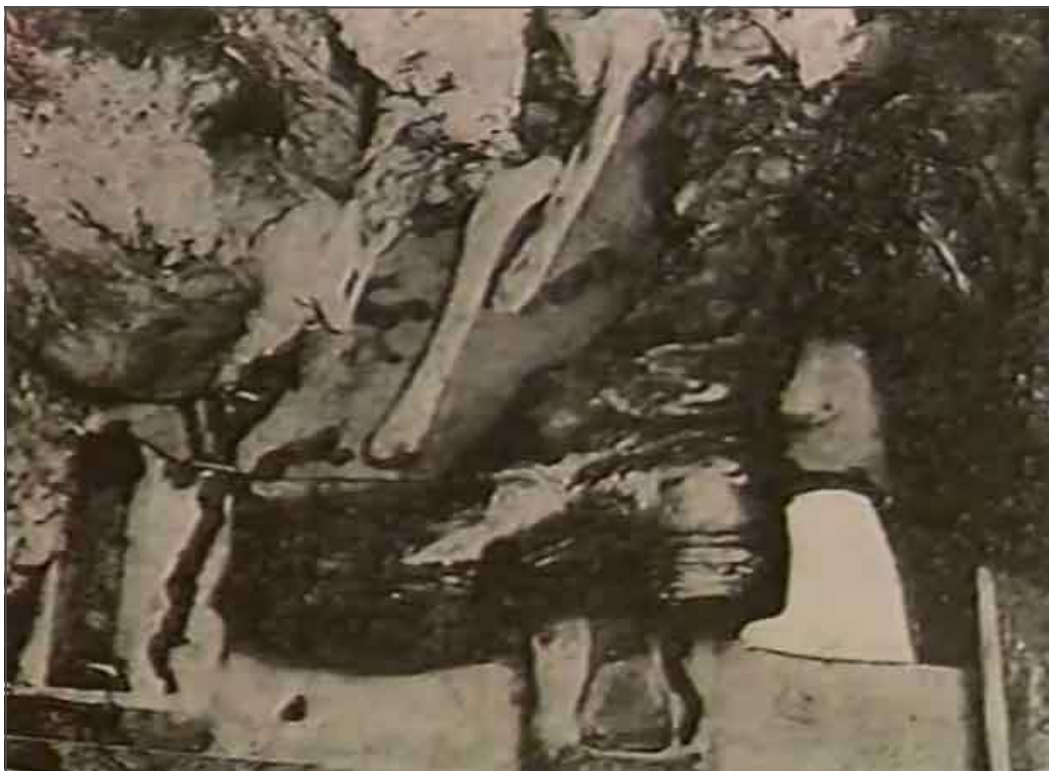
Remains found in the shark



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Remains found in the shark



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