How earthquakes have changed history

By Amanda Foreman, Wall Street Journal

The Big One is looking a little more likely these days. Since the California earthquake of 1857, tectonic plates along the San Andreas Fault are thought to have shifted by as much as 26 feet.

Only last year, scientists raised the chances of a quake in California of magnitude 8.0 or greater in the next 30 years to 7 percent from 4.7 percent. Unfortunately, for all the sophisticated science behind this prediction, nobody knows whether this means devastation tomorrow or many decades from now.

The mystery surrounding earthquakes—the fact that they can strike at any time without warning—has puzzled humans for eons. The ancient Greeks believed that they were signals of the god Poseidon's displeasure. Judeo-Christian cultures considered them divine punishment for individual or collective sin. Other societies avoided the blame game in favor of supernatural phenomena. One popular explanation involved giant animals moving underneath the Earth: a frog in Chinese stories, a catfish in Japan, a turtle according to some Native American tribes.

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