

## BUSINESS NEWS

UP IN FLAMES

# The hellacious names of Italy's heat waves are being chosen for good reason

From Cerberus to Charon, Italy's naming of heat waves is evocative, politically charged, and consummately Italian



Getting heated.

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By **Gabriela Riccardi** Published July 20, 2023

As record-breaking heat waves sweep across Italy and the rest of Europe, their dangers are proving fatal. But also capturing headlines are the heat waves' evocative appellations, all straight out of classical mythology.

Earlier this summer, international outlets began tracking the anticyclone Cerberus, named for hell's three-headed hound with Southern Europe in its jaws. Then came the anticyclone Charon, the ferryman of the underworld, steering citizens towards blazing temperatures. You may have also heard of the anticyclone Minos, the serpent-tailed judge who condemns sinners to the flames. As tourists fight the temptation to seek relief in the Trevi Fountain, some wags have rechristened Rome's long-standing epithet: The eternal city is now the infernal city.

The man behind these names is Antonio Sanò, a meteorology engineer and the founder of the Italian weather website iLMeteo. "There's a certain analogy between the heat and these infernal names that evoke the flames of hell," he told Quartz. In Italy, there's no official body that assigns names to high- and low-pressure meteorological events, such as the spinning anticyclones that cause heat waves. So Sanò has been assigning them himself since 2012.

The World Meteorological Organization, which names international storms, argued this past week that naming heat waves can serve as a distraction from what matters: how to keep safe, for instance. But others point out that naming these silent, deadly events raises awareness of their danger. Extreme heat is often the deadliest of weather events, even compared to hurricanes and winter storms. Last year, more than 61,000 people in Europe died due to summer heat waves. Earlier this month the world recorded its hottest day ever, and the United Nations has found that climate change has already doubled the odds of such heat waves. Sanò's admiration of

the classics—and of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, in particular—will be put to work again and again.

### **Europe's descent into heat wave hell, guided by Dante**

The *Divine Comedy*, Dante's three-part epic inspired by classical mythology, was a flashpoint in the history of the Italian language. In fact, it helped establish it. In the early 14th century, Italian city-states spoke thousands of different Latin-derived dialects. But Dante broke with the tradition of writing literature in Latin, choosing instead the vernacular of his native Florence. The *Divine Comedy* spread his local language across the city-states, catalyzing the Florentine dialect's transformation into today's standard Italian. In his seminal history of the language, *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita*, the linguist Tullio De Mauro writes that 60% of the essential vocabulary of modern-day Italian existed at the beginning of the 1300s. By the end of that century, much thanks to Dante's masterpiece, it was 90%.

In fact, it was language that began unifying the nation before any government did; it would take five and a half more centuries until Italy was consolidated as one country in 1861. But now the language of the *Divina Commedia* has found its way into an unlikely new territory: that of climate crisis.

A lover of the classics, Sanò draws his heat wave monikers from Dante's hell-cast text. Announcements on iLMeteo go viral within hours. "In the past we've also had Roman emperors like Nero, or military leaders like Scipio or Hannibal," he adds. "The most terrible,

however, remains Lucifer, a name that we assign only to the strongest heat wave of the summer.” And leaning on that vivid lore, the names are intended to mark the intensity of heat waves each season.

## **Why are heat waves being given names?**

Sanò’s climate descriptions are often colorful, wave-related or not: Temperatures are hailed as “true protagonists” of the weekend, and the weekend becomes “just the appetizer” of thermal escalations. And while some in the world of weather science appreciate the poetic flourish, the popularity of Cerberus and Charon have started a small skirmish in the climate community about whether heat waves should be named at all, let alone for mythological monsters.

Certain critics say the practice of naming heat crises after characters in epic lore is “somewhat sensationalistic,” while others assert that building “a culture of awareness” is vital to the fight against climate change. The Italian Meteorological Society, for one, is firmly in the first camp. “The name is unofficial, and we absolutely don’t use it,” Luca Mercalli, the group’s president, told WIRED as Cerberus began cresting this summer.

But other climate scientists disagree, especially in localities where perilous heat hits hardest. “Unlike other adverse weather events, you can’t see extreme heat,” Kostas Lagouvardos, the research director at the National Observatory of Athens, told The Guardian’s Observer in 2021. The organization, he added, believes people are

more likely to take heat preparation seriously “when the event has a name.”

## **Cities all over the world are now naming heat waves**

Last year, the Spanish city of Seville implemented the first government-sanctioned naming and ranking systems for heat waves; others including Melbourne, Los Angeles, and Milwaukee are at work on their own. Steaming cities from Athens to Miami have also appointed new titles, chief heat officers, to deal with the fallout of rocketing temperatures.

Extreme heat, climate scientists assert, “needs branding and identity,” a way to become “more tangible to imaginations,” and greater recognition “as a discrete threat” like storms and hurricanes. Names do just that, they add. “Heat waves should be categorized and named before they begin, not after they end,” the climate resilience foundation Arsht-Rock, which collaborated with Seville on its system, says on its website.

Admittedly, some of these scientists also worry that assigning monstrous names to heat induces more panic than preparedness. But Sanò dismisses the idea. “We have no intention of terrorizing people: The public interprets these names as a lighthearted reference, not to be afraid, but mindful of dealing with the heat wave,” he said. “It helps raise awareness of increasingly extreme weather, as the latest climate data shows.”

In any case, the controversies around Cerberus and Charon are an apt tribute to their literary inspiration. Dante composed his

masterwork while in political excommunication, exiled from the city whose language he would bring to a nation. Written from the road, his *Commedia* was unafraid to agitate. It condemned real members of the Florentine ruling class; it assailed the power of the Catholic church; it placed a pope in a circle of hell. Dante, of all people, knew that language—vivid, provocative, damned—could seize people for centuries, changing the very course of our world.

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