5.2 Food shortages in pre-industrial Europe

Conveners: Tim Newfield and Philip Slavin

Chair: Phillipp Schofield

5.21 Tim Newfield – Subsistence crises in Carolingian Europe (*c*.750–*c*.950): frequency, causes, and effects

The subsistence crises of early medieval Europe (500–1000 CE) have been widely overlooked. Not only have the causes and effects of the food shortages of this period yet to receive detailed attention but many shortages remain to be identified in time and space. This paper surveys the annals, capitularies, correspondence, histories, *gestae* and *vitae* of Carolingian Europe (*c*.750–*c*.950 CE) and the palaeoclimatic evidence (derived from ice cores, glacier moraines, speleothem**,** tree rings and varves) relevant to the period in order to identify and comment on the frequency, causes and effects of subsistence crises in the Carolingian period. Written evidence from Ireland, England, Italy and Greece is drawn upon to illuminate possible pan-European events.

These two centuries were marked by at least four major crises. The demographic and economic effects of these major food shortages are inferred from the extant written evidence, established trends in Carolingian urbanisation and trade, and the ramifications of later pre-industrial European food shortages. Major Carolingian subsistence crises lasting multiple years are argued to have been primarily the product of exceptionally poor weather, not Malthusian pressure or entitlement decline.

Timothy P. Newfield is a PhD Candidate in the Department of History at McGill University (Montreal, Canada). His PhD dissertation draws on textual and material evidence to examine the disease, hunger and weather of Carolingian Europe (c.750–c.950 CE). In January 2011, he will commence a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Michigan. There he will examine the impact of, and relationship between, disease and short-term climatic events in sixth- and seventh-century continental Europe.

5.22 Nils Hybel – Food supplies, long-distance trade, climate and population 1000–1350

A study of medieval grain yields compared to the development of prices reveals that the margin between a normal harvest and scarcity was very narrow because of the small grain yields involved. Bad harvests were caused by too much rain, drought, or a long, hard winter. These climatic circumstances did not always give rise to famine, of course, which could be caused by circumstances other than bad weather. Famine was a recurring phenomenon in the middle ages and could be triggered by floods, wars, and commercial sanctions, such as blockades etc., although it is true that most food shortages were caused by unfavourable weather. The gravest situations arose, of course, when the climate was unfavourable in successive years, in most cases two or three years running. To generate serious human and demographic consequences a famine had not only to continue for two or three years in succession but it also had to cover a large geographical area. The extent of the medieval trade in victuals should not be overestimated, but trade in grain and other foodstuffs was quite developed and in a critical situation relief could be found in imports from places not affected by unfavourable weather. From 1000 to 1350 nine periods of bad weather lasting two or more successive years blighted northern Europe. These episodes caused great human misery and retarded the general trend of population growth throughout the high middle ages.

Nils Hybel is Associate Professor, Saxo-Institute for Humanities, University of Copenhagen. His recent publications include ‘Early Commercial Contacts between England, Prussia and Poland’ in Richard Unger with the assistance of Jakub Basista (eds), *Britain and Poland-Lithuania: Contact and Comparison from the Middle Ages to 1795* (2008) and (with Bjørn Poulsen), *The Danish Resources* c.*1000–1550: Growth and Recession* (2007).

5.23 Philip Slavin –The Great European Famine between ecology and institutions: reflections from England, *c*.1314–1330

Whether subsistence crises in pre-industrial societies were created by environmental or institutional factors has long been a matter of scholarly debate. Beginning with Amartya Sen's influential monograph on the Bengalese famine of 1942–3 and what he coined as 'food entitlement crisis' (1981), some social historians have attributed much importance to institutions as the single most important factor in constructing famines. More recently, however, an increasing number of scholars have advocated environmental aspects as the first and foremost bringer of pre-industrial subsistence crises (most recently, Campbell and Hoyle).

My paper tests these two different, although not necessarily contradicting views, by using the Great European Famine of *c*.1314–22 (which, in reality, continued at least into the early 1330s) as a test-study. Using an abundant corpus of primary sources from England, which includes manorial accounts, food accounts and purveyance accounts, my paper will examine what factors are to be blamed for *bringing about* the crisis and which ones accounted for *intensifying* it. It will also be argue that in order to get a fuller appreciation of a subsistence crisis within pre-industrial societies, it is essential to consider not only the *causes*, but also the *victims*.

Dr Philip Slavin is a Mellon fellow at the Economics Department at McGill University, Montreal. He received his PhD – which examined the process of food production and consumption in late-medieval Norfolk – from the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto in 2008, after which he was a post-doctoral associate at the Economic Growth Center, Yale University. Philip is the author of a number of articles on economic and environmental history of late medieval England. He is currently working on a book on food production and consumption in late medieval Norwich Cathedral Priory, tentatively entitled *Bread and ale for brethren: Norwich Cathedral Priory and its grain supply,* c.*1250–1420*.

5.24 Bruce Campbell and Cormac Ó Gráda – Harvest shortfalls, grain prices and famines in pre-industrial England

Fresh data on English grain yields 1268–1480 are combined with revised price series to measure the frequency and scale of serious harvest shortfalls and estimate the elasticity of demand for cereals. Major food availability declines are shown to have been a significant component of most historical subsistence crises, as back-to-back shortfalls were of the worst famines. Although farmers did achieve some reduction in yield variance *c*.1400 to *c*.1800, serious harvest shortfalls long remained an unavoidable fact of economic life. England's progressive escape from famine therefore arose primarily from improved market integration coupled with more effective protection of the entitlements of the poor.

Bruce M. S. Campbell is a Member of the Royal Irish Academy, an Academician of Social Sciences, and a Fellow of the British Academy. He is Professor of Medieval Economic History in the School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology at the Queen's University of Belfast. Bruce's field of scholarship is the economic history of late-medieval Britain and Ireland, with particular reference to human–environment interactions during the fourteenth century, and trends in agricultural output and productivity from the thirteenth to nineteenth centuries.

Cormac Ó Gráda is an Irish economist, a professor of economics at University College Dublin, and a prolific author of books and academic papers. As a historian of economics his most quoted works are on the Irish famine of the late 1840s, and studies of fluctuations in the Irish population. Over 100 of his academic papers are available online. He is a member of the Cliometric Society, the Economic History Society, the European Historical Economics Society, the Irish Economic and Social History Society and the Royal Irish Academy. He is also a co-editor for the European Review of Economic History, a learned journal.