

Citation

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The Socio-Economic Impacts of the Dantean Anomaly (1309-1321) in Eastern France

by Thomas Labbé

1000 Worte Forschung: *Ongoing subproject in the Dantean Anomaly JRG, GWZO Leipzig*

While famines and subsistence crises have captivated French rural historians since the dawn of quantitative and social history in the mid-twentieth century, specialists of the Middle Ages have nonetheless been less active in this field than their colleagues from modern history. While their English counterparts have developed a rich historiography addressing the period of the Great Famine (1315–1521) on the other side of the Channel, French medievalists have yet to study this period in detail.

By documenting the economic and social impacts of the crisis in this region and paying special attention to the relationship between climate and society, this research strives to place eastern France in the European context of the Dantean Anomaly. It is based largely on contemporary chronicles written in the vast region between Paris and the Mediterranean Sea and on the collection of manorial rolls of the county of Savoy (Fig. 1). The manorial rolls of present-day Bresse and Savoy—which have yet to be studied in this way—are good candidates for case studies to address this question. Based on the model of the famous English pipe rolls, they are available for several castellanies from the end of the thirteenth century onwards, which is exceptional even within a broader European context. These sources offer an opportunity to investigate how the rapid climate change in the early fourteenth century impacted a rural economy at the local level and what the consequences of the crisis of 1315–1317 were in this area, which historians have generally considered the southernmost region impacted by this global event. In addition, because the region encompasses both plains and alpine areas it is also possible to compare its impact in these different geographical zones.

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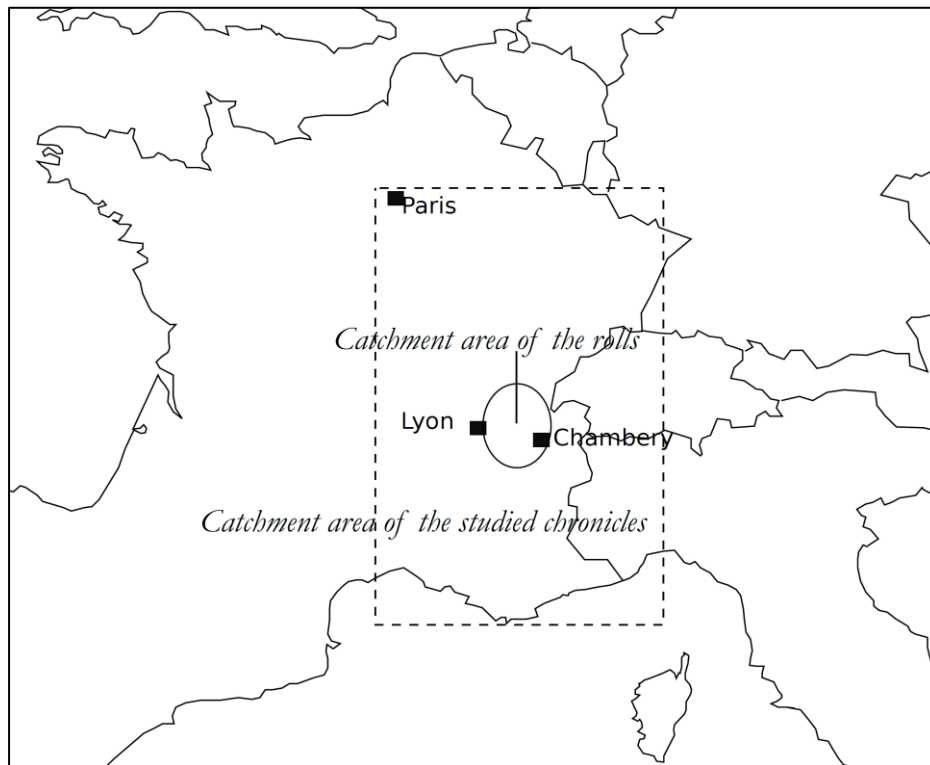


Figure 1: Geographical context of the presented sub project. Source: Thomas Labbé, CC BY-SA.

The first step will be to outline general climatic variations in the entire region over a long time span (1200–1400) by analyzing the chronicle narratives alongside the account records. The Climate indices based on these chronicles can then be compared with other regions. Because the number of chronicles covering this area is limited, however, the results will be crosschecked and completed using the available natural proxy data (including, at least, alpine dendrochronological documentation).

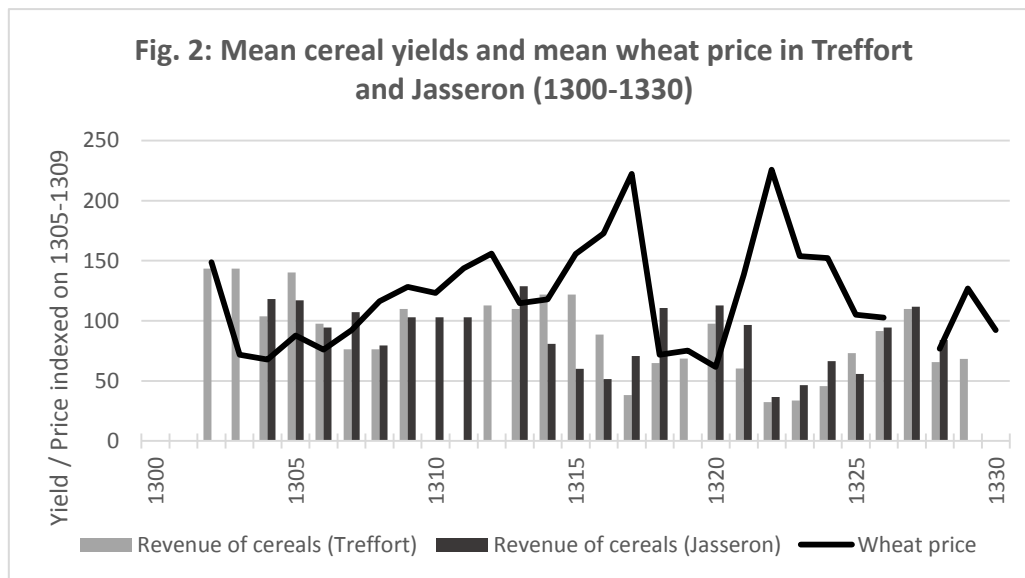
The study will next focus on the manorial rolls for the period 1300–1330, which provide continuous data about incomes, wages, and the prices of cereals, wine, and vegetables. A first survey concerning two castellanies of the Bresse has already illustrated how economic parameters varied in response to weather. It highlighted the low cereal yields and high prices

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(fig. 2) which resulted from the extremely rainy summers in 1315–1317 and the cyclone-prone summers of 1321–1323.



Source: Thomas Labbé, CC BY-SA

A quantitative analysis of such data for approximately twenty different castellanies will provide a more precise overview of the economic conjuncture and of the climate's social impact. The rolls also provide direct information about damage to infrastructure, land sales, and criminality rates, as well as indirect information about variations in demography and cattle plagues in the key period, 1300–1330. Using this data, it is possible to describe historical weather events with considerable precision and outline possible correlations to various social parameters. How are calamitous weather and migration related? Does weather influence mortality rates, or was social adaptation adequate to compensate for these challenges? Can we establish a link between poverty and cyclonic weather conditions, or between climate stress and criminality, as modern economists do?

Finally, from a cultural perspective interested in the history of mentalities, this project aims to investigate how those living in the fourteenth century themselves perceived climate and its

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impacts on foodstuff availability and the fluctuation of estate economies. This final step seeks to reconstruct the proper medieval etiology of economic and social processes. Given modern improvements in technology and market integration, food crises are generally attributed to endogenous social factors affecting the distribution. The exogenous impacts of climate on production are seen only as contributing factors. Recent French scholarship has likewise pointed to market trends as the driving factor behind the food crisis of the early fourteenth century.¹ However, if the goal is to understand medieval social reactions to the crisis, we must go beyond our modern point-of-view to address this debate about environmental determinism. As specialists in disaster studies have long since established, both social vulnerability and coping mechanisms in emergencies depend to a large extent on cultural patterns. Understanding medieval mentalities towards climate is thus critical to explaining social reactions in this period.

One strategy to glean information regarding medieval mentalities from the historical record is to consider the cultural implications of estate managers' notations. Read this way, the rolls can divulge a great deal more than the obvious quantitative data. For example, managers used the weather conditions as a political argument to justify deviations in revenue to the central administration. Comparing these cases with other justifications (war, epidemics, poverty, etc.) can shed light on just how influential managers perceived such events to be on the short-term economic conjuncture. In addition, it will be necessary to read the primary sources with a developed awareness of historical semantics. To this end, the project aims to create a textual databank based on the corpus of chronicles to facilitate data mining analysis with which to isolate the core concepts and the main reactions to climate anomalies in the Late Middle Ages.

¹ Les disettes dans la conjoncture de 1300 en Méditerranée occidentale, ed. by Monique Bourin, John Drendel and François Menant, Rome 2011.