

## The “Big Chill”—Early 14<sup>c</sup> Western Europe

The story we are about to tell is not a pleasant one, but it speaks to the extraordinary scope of human experiences that occurred in Europe in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The fourteenth century dawned with a chill. In 1303, and then again during 1306-1307, the Baltic Sea froze over. No one had ever heard of that happening before, and the freezings foretold worse disasters. The cold spread beyond its normal winter season, arriving earlier in the autumn and staying later into the summer. Then it started to rain and did not let up. The Caspian Sea began to rise, flooding villages along its shores. In the summer of 1314 all across Europe, crops rotted in sodden fields. The meager harvest came late, precipitating a surge in prices for farm produce and forcing King Edward II of England to impose price controls. But capping prices did not grow more food.

In 1315 the situation got worse:

In the year of our Lord 1315, apart from the other hardships with which England was afflicted, hunger grew in the land.... Meat and eggs began to run out, capons and fowl could hardly be found, animals died of pest, swine could not be fed because of the excessive price of fodder. A quarter of wheat or beans or peas sold for twenty shillings [*In 1313 a quarter of wheat sold for five shillings.*], barley for a mark, oats for ten shillings. A quarter of salt was commonly sold for thirty-five shillings, which in former times was quite unheard of. The land was so oppressed with want that when the king came to St. Albans on the feast of St. Laurence [August 10] it was hardly possible to find bread on sale to supply his immediate household....

The dearth began in the month of May and lasted until the feast of the nativity of the Virgin [September 8]. The summer rains were so heavy that grain could not ripen. It could hardly be gathered and used to bake bread down to the said feast day unless it was first put in vessels to dry. Around the end of autumn the dearth was mitigated in part, but toward Christmas it became as bad as before. Bread did not have its usual nourishing power and strength because the grain was not nourished by the warmth of summer sunshine. Hence those who ate it, even in large quantities, were hungry again after a little while. There can be no doubt that the poor wasted away when even the rich were constantly hungry....

Considering and understanding these past miseries and those that were still to come, we can see how the prophecy of Jeremiah is fulfilled in the English people: "If I go forth into the fields, behold those slain with the sword, and if I enter into the city behold them that are consumed with famine" (Jeremiah 14.18). Going "forth into the fields" when we call to mind the ruin of our people in Scotland and Gascony, Wales and Ireland ... Entering the city we consider "them that are consumed with famine" when we see the poor and needy, crushed with hunger, lying stiff and dead in the wards and streets....

Four pennies worth of coarse bread was not enough to feed a common man for one day. The usual kinds of meat, suitable for eating, were too scarce; horse meat was precious; plump dogs were stolen. And, according to many reports, men and women in many places secretly ate their own children....<sup>1</sup>

In England during that year, the price of wheat rose 800 percent. Preachers compared the ceaseless rains to the great flood in the Bible, and floods did come, overwhelming dikes in the Netherlands and

England, washing away entire towns in Germany, turning fields into lakes in France. Everywhere crops failed.

And then things got much worse. Torrential rains fell again in 1316, and for the third straight year the crops failed, creating the most severe famine in recorded European history. The effects were most dramatic in the far North. In Scandinavia agriculture almost disappeared, in Iceland peasants abandoned farming and turned to fishing and herding sheep, and in Greenland the European settlers began to die out. Already malnourished, the people of Europe became susceptible to disease and starvation. Desperate people resorted to desperate options. They ate cats, rats, insects, reptiles, animal dung, and tree leaves....In Poland the starving were said to cut down criminals from the gallows for food.

By the 1340s, nearly all of Europe was in an endless cycle of disease and famine. Then came the deadliest epidemics in European history, the Black Death, which killed at least one-third of the total population....

Of all the frightening elements of these disasters, perhaps most frightening was that their causes were hidden or completely unknowable given the technology and medical understanding of the time. In many respects, the West was held captive by the climate, economic forces that no one completely understood, and microbes that would not be identified for another 550 years....

**Source:**

*The West: Encounters and Transformations.* Brian Levack, et. al. Pearson Longman. New York: 2004, p. 325-326.

<sup>1</sup>From Johannes de Trokelowe, *Annates*, H. T. Riley, ed., Rolls Series, No. 28, Vol. (London, 1866), pp. 92-95. Translated by Brian Tierney.