Praying for food: Italian Famines in the 1300s

By: Tomas Creus

In 1328, in a court in Perugia, three brothers were convicted of trying to smuggle wheat from the city of Perugia to the city of Fabriano. That was, ordinarily, not a very serious crime, but because of a new draconian law issued as a measure against a current famine, they were sentenced not only to a heavy pecuniary penalty, but also to having, each of them, one of their feet cut off.

PREVIOUS PAGE: *Third Horseman from the Cloister Apocalypse, ca. 1330 (Normandy). F.8 v. The third horseman, riding a black horse, brings famine. The scales represent a tenfold increase in food prices. St. John watches from the margin. ©Wikimedia Commons.*

The rise in the price of wheat is also evidence that not all was well food-wise in the region that year: in 1319, the price for a ***corba*** (an old measure of volume equivalent to about 78 liters) of grain was fixed at 4 liras. In 1328, it went up to 11 liras, and just one year later, it doubled to 22 liras, more than four times the original price.

While the Great Famine of 1315–1317 that ravaged Northern Europe, it left Italy mostly unscathed, while other European famines later in the century affected Italy as well. One of the most serious noted in the historical records was the one that took place during the years of 1328–1330, and affected not only Perugia, in Umbria, as noted, but most of the northern and central part of Italy – basically everywhere except for the South. According to several authors, that famine in Italy had the same significance that the Great Famine had for Northern Europe. And yet, it was only the first of a series of famines.

Perhaps even worse than the one of 1328, was the one recorded in 1346–1347, caused by an unusual rainy season that ruined all the crops and affected the entire north and center of Italy, including major cities such as Florence and Rome. This was followed but an even worse disaster: the plague that started in 1347, and caused the loss of an estimated 30% to 60% of the Italian population.

Harvesting wheat. From, The Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg, Duchess of Normandy,8v. 9.r, before 1349. ©MET

EVIL SIBLINGS: FAMINE AND PLAGUE

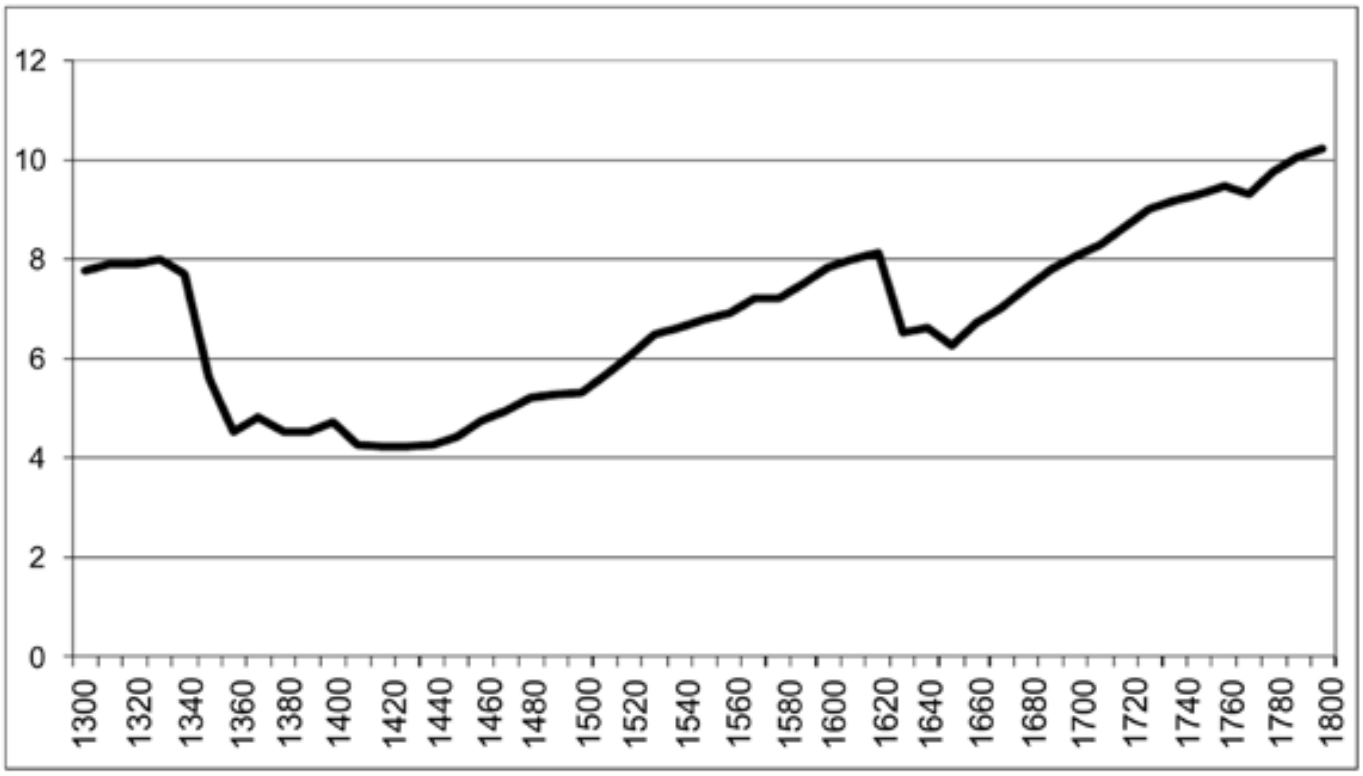
Many medieval chroniclers have already observed that there was usually a correlation between famine and plague -- and, occasionally, also war. It makes sense that a people debilitated by the lack of proper nutrition would be more susceptible to diseases, and it also stands that wars and invasions would occasionally affect the distribution of food. But there were other elements in play here, that perhaps were not noticed by such early chroniclers – the population increase.

In the paper "*Italian famines: an overview*" (2016), Guido Alfani observes that periods of both famine and plague took place at points of high population pressure, when there were about 8 million people living in north-central Italy, and 14 million across the whole country. The first time this limit is reached occurs in the first decades of the 1300s, after which we have several famines, followed by plague, and a drastic reduction of the population to almost half (to approximately 4 million). Then over the course of the next 300 years, the population rebounds to reach 8 million again, and again the same process occurs: serious famines in 1590 and 1618 are followed by a plague a few years later, and the population falls to 6 million. It will only pass the 8 million ceiling again after the eighteenth century.

Depiction of Famine and Death. *From, the Apocalypse in a Biblia Pauperum illuminated at Erfurt around the time of the Great Famine of 1315–1317. Death ("Mors") sits astride a lion whose long tail ends in a ball of flame (Hell). Famine ("Fames") points to her hungry mouth. ©Wikimedia Commons.*

However, the immediate cause of famines, at least according to most scholars, were heavy rain during the spring, and a change in average temperature that would ruin many crops. Other authors observed that such climatic instability also favored the spread of diseases, so in that case, the explanation for the correlation of plague and famine in the same period was not so much that malnutrition from the famines would cause disease, but that the changes in the climate were the cause of both famine and plague.

Graph 3. Italian population of the Centre-North, 1300-1800 (millions)



Sources: database kindly provided by Paolo Malanima, with small corrections around years 1630 and 1656-57 to take into account recent revisions of plague mortality in the seventeenth century (Alfani 2013b).

Italian population in the Centre-North, *1300-1800. By Guido Alfani.*
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Bad omens. *In the Middles Ages, omens, such as comets were believed by some people to cause famines. This is a representation of strange events, which were seen in connection with two comets in 1456: a double-headed calf in front, and a rain of blood, and pieces of meat.*

OMENS, SIN, AND PRAYER

Contemporary chroniclers also observed climatic changes, and particularly, the unusual amount of rain that fell in such years in the 1300s. They also offered other (more supernatural) explanations for the ultimate cause of these afflictions. Giovanni Villani (1280–1348), who wrote his ***Cronica*** about Florence in the mid 1300s, saw the cause of both plague and famine -- as well as other natural disasters, such as floods and fires -- as a result of God's punishment for people's sins. He also observed that comets were always seen in the night skies a year or so before each famine. Comets were traditionally considered omens of bad luck. But Villani also wrote that "God can turn good into evil, and evil into good, according to his wish, by the grace of the Saints or the expiation of sins."

Therefore, the recommended solution was to stop sinning and to pray fervently, so that God would stop both famine and disease. And, indeed, many periods of famine were concluded with a religious procession after the situation had resolved itself – at least until the next famine.

This view of famines as punishment for sins, and the general idea that a solution for them could only be obtained through penance and prayer, would continue for several centuries; so much so that even in 1646, in Syracuse (Sicily), there was a great famine, and the local population directed their prayers to Saint Lucia, patron saint of the city. One day a quail was seen entering the church and standing on top of the altar. It was the answer to their prayers: a flock of quail was announcing the arrival of a ship full of grain to the city's port. In remembrance of the miracle, from that day forward to the present day, during the traditional processions to Saint Lucia in Syracuse in May of every year, a flock of quail is released into the skies to commemorate the event.

Further Reading

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