

The Great Famine of 1315 -- Frequently Asked Questions Pass-Arounds #1

Have you ever been really hungry? Imagine what it would feel like to be hungry for days, weeks, months, and even years. This is what happened to the people in Europe during a period called the **Great Famine**. This **famine began in 1315 and lasted until 1317**, but the people of Europe didn't really have a steady food supply until about 1322. During this time **millions of people died from starvation**. **Many people died from diseases** that their bodies could not fight off because they were weak from not enough food. Life during the Middle Ages was harsh and people often had to deal with **food shortages** but the Famine of 1315 was widespread and extreme.

Where was the Great Famine?

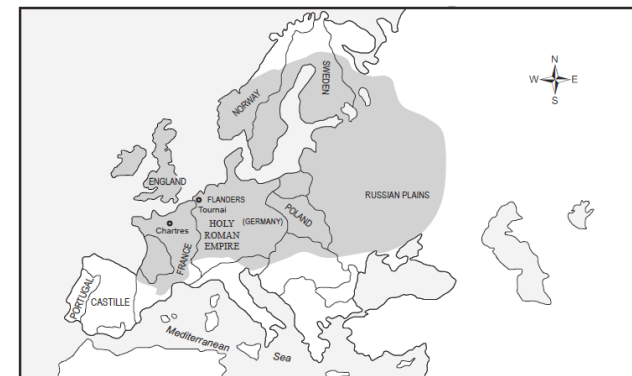
This famine **affected much of Northern Europe**. It stretched from the Russian Plains to the east, Ireland to the west, from Scandinavia to the north, and to the Alps to the south.

Famine: lack of food



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Europe at the time of the Famine of 1315-1317



Area affected by Famine of 1315-1317

0 250 500 miles
0 250 500 kilometers

ARIZONA
GEOGRAPHIC ALLIANCE

Courtesy: Arizona Geographic Alliance <http://alliance.azsu.edu/alliance/>
School of Geographical Sciences, Arizona State University
Bridget L. Goss
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The Great Famine of 1315 -- Frequently Asked Questions Pass-Arounds #2

What were some reasons for the famine?

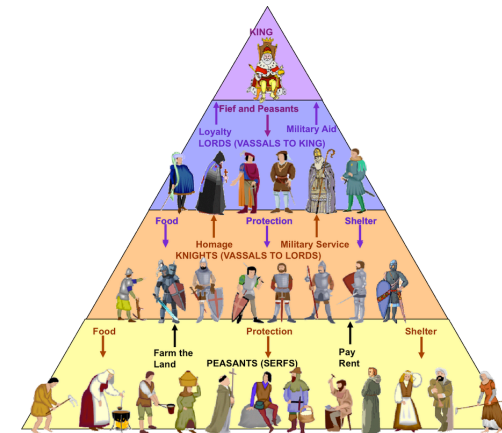
Around **1280 the climate of Europe began changing**. A cooling trend called the “**Little Ice Age**” began which lasted until the late 1500’s. Before this change in climate, Europe had been in a climate period called the “Medieval Warm Period”. Because the climate conditions during this time made it possible to grow a lot of food, the population began to increase. England’s population had increased from 1.4 million to 5 million by 1300. In France, the population had increased from 6.2 million to 17.6 million.

Besides the weather issues, the way society was organized made it difficult to handle the famine. In a **feudal society** the **nobility was responsible for the care of the peasants (serfs) on their land**; however, some of the nobility **did not manage their land very well**. Most of the nobility did not properly care for the soil that made it hard to grow food. In addition, the **nobles and the wealthy only stored enough emergency grain for themselves**. In many cases, even this was not enough and the nobility also suffered during the famine.

Climate change: Average temperature changed, becoming much colder than usual.



Feudal society: a way of life in Europe many years ago



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The Great Famine of 1315 -- Frequently Asked Questions Pass-Arounds #3

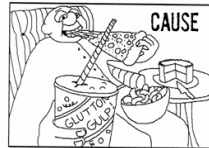
Was this the first famine in Europe?

No. **Famine was common during the Middle Ages** with the average person seeing three to four famines during their lifetime.

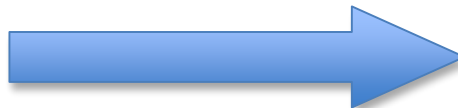
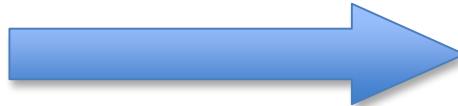
Between 536-551 AD, a “dust veil event” (where the sun’s radiation is blocked from reaching the earth) occurred. The weather was changed by this event. **Temperatures were lower**, and there were **long periods of drought (lack of rainfall)** resulting in famine.

In addition, the **Bubonic plague, a deadly disease, struck** many parts of Europe **killing millions of people and reducing the production of food.**

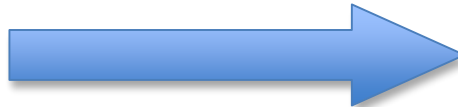
cause: reason for something to change



effect: change that is a result of an action (cause)



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The Great Famine of 1315 -- Frequently Asked Questions Pass-Arounds #4

What happened during the Great Famine?

In the **spring of 1315** it began to rain and the **temperatures remained cool**. Here is what people living during the time actually wrote:

The deluge began in 1315, seven weeks after Easter. "During this season [spring 1315] it rained most marvellously and for so long," wrote a contemporary observer, Jean Désnouelles. Across northern Europe, sheets of rain spread in waves over the sodden countryside, dripping from thatched eaves, flowing in endless rivulets down muddy country lanes. Wrote chronicler Bernardo Guidonis: "Exceedingly great rains descended from the heavens, and they made huge and deep mud-pools on the land." Freshly plowed fields turned into shallow lakes. City streets and narrow alleys became jostling, slippery quagmires. June passed, then July with little break in the weather. Only occasionally did a watery sun break through the clouds, before the rain started again. "Throughout nearly all of May, July, and August, the rains did not cease," complained one writer.²

Because of the rain, the grain could not ripen. The straw and hay for the animals could not be dried, so there was **no food for the animals**. Also the rains made it **difficult to produce salt, that was used to preserve meat**. During this time most of the peasants ate bread as a main part of their diet. **Because of scarcity, the price of food, especially bread, began to rise.**

The rains continued in 1316. **The people became weaker and suffered from many diseases.** Many of the children and elderly died. **The people ate just about anything to stay alive.** They would gather food from the forests such as roots, plants, grasses, nuts, and bark.

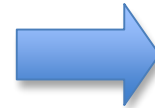
In the towns, the urban poor ate less bread. Wrote a Flemish observer in 1316: "The people were in such great need that it cannot be expressed. For the cries that were heard from the poor would move a stone, as they lay in the street with woe and great complain, swollen with hunger."⁹ In Flanders, bread was no longer made from wheat but from anything that was available. Sixteen Parisian bakers were caught putting hog dung and wine dregs in their loaves. They were placed on punishment wheels in public squares and forced to hold fragments of the rotten bread in their hands. People went days without eating and assuaged hunger pangs by eating leaves, roots, and the occasional fish taken from a stream.

The rains continued in the summer of 1317, making conditions even worse in parts . Some areas of Europe did begin to see increases in their grain harvests by 1319.

The Great Famine of 1315 -- Frequently Asked Questions Pass-Arounds #5

Why didn't they eat meat?

Some people did kill and eat their farm animals and horses. However, **the weather during this time was especially hard on the livestock.** The **farmers couldn't produce enough hay or gains for the animals** because of the wet conditions. During the winter of 1317 and 1318, the weather turned very cold. **Thousands of animals froze to death in their pastures or died from disease.** The loss of livestock continued until the 1320's. The animal that survived the best during this time was the pig.



The Great Famine of 1315 -- Frequently Asked Questions Pass-Arounds #6

How did the people act during the famine?

Many people became beggars and thieves. Anything of value would be stolen to be **used to buy whatever food could be found.** During this time, people believed that the famine was a punishment from God. Many people turned to religion hoping that God would end the famine.

It was a very hard time for children. Sometimes parents who **could not feed their children would abandon them** in towns or in the forest. Also, **many children were left orphans when their parents died** with no one to take care of them.

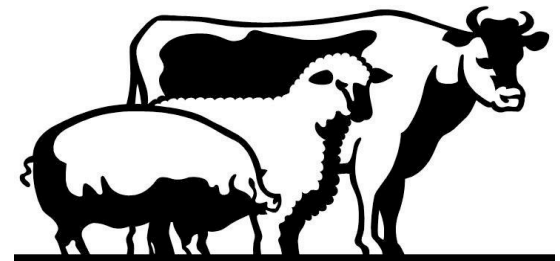


The Great Famine of 1315 -- Frequently Asked Questions Pass-Arounds #7

When did the famine end?

The harvests did not become dependable until 1320s. **It took longer to recover from the famine for several reasons.** First, there was a **scarcity of the grain used as seed** for new crops. In 1317, there was so little food, that starving people had eaten much of seeds for grain. A bushel of seed was needed to produce four bushels of wheat. Secondly, the **weakened population could not work as hard.** Thirdly, there were **few work animals left.** **By 1325, the food supply had returned to normal, and the population of Europe again started to increase.**

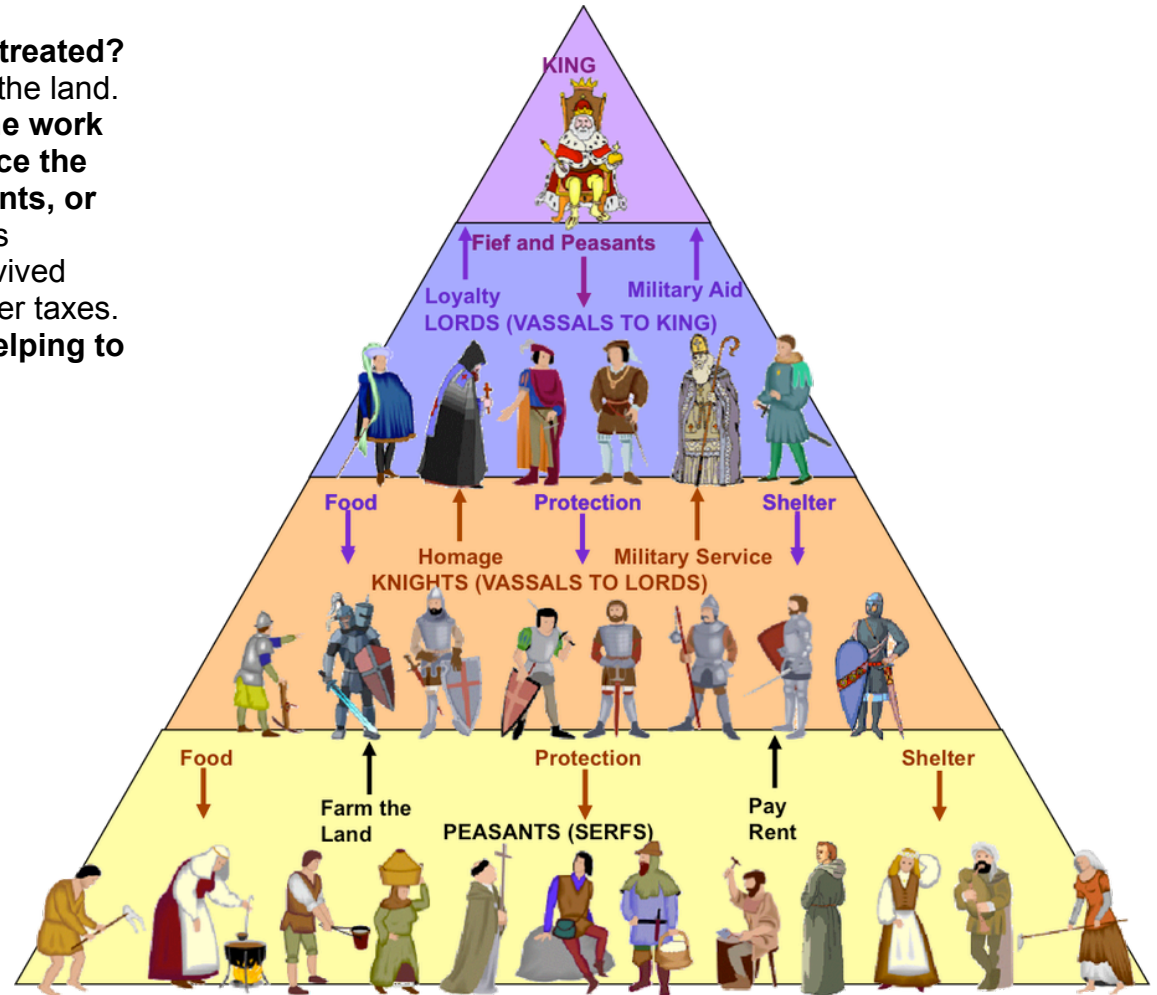
The **weather became warmer and drier, with milder winters,** through the 1330's. However, conditions did not return to earlier years because the weather continued to be unpredictable and the coolness was pushing Europe into "The Little Ice Age" that lasted until about 1850.



The Great Famine of 1315 -- Frequently Asked Questions Pass-Arounds #8

Did the famine change the way the peasants were treated?

In the feudal society, peasants (serfs) were **bound** to the land. The system was based on the **peasants providing the work** on the land and the **noble providing protection**. Once the **landowners were not able to provide for the peasants, or treat them very well, they began to revolt**. This was especially true after the famine ended. Those that survived began to demand higher wages for their work and lower taxes. These protests became more and more successful, **helping to end the feudal system in Europe**.



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The Great Famine of 1315 -- Frequently Asked Questions Pass-Arounds Notes

#1 Where was the Great Famine?

#3 Was this the first famine in Europe?

#2 What were some reasons for the famine?

#4 What happened during the Great Famine?

The Great Famine of 1315 -- Frequently Asked Questions Pass-Arounds Notes

#5 Why didn't they eat meat?

#7 When did the famine end?

#6 How did the people act during the famine?

#8 Did the famine change the way the peasants were treated?