

The Great Famine of 1315 -- Frequently Asked Questions

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 wide-spread 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

When did the famine end?

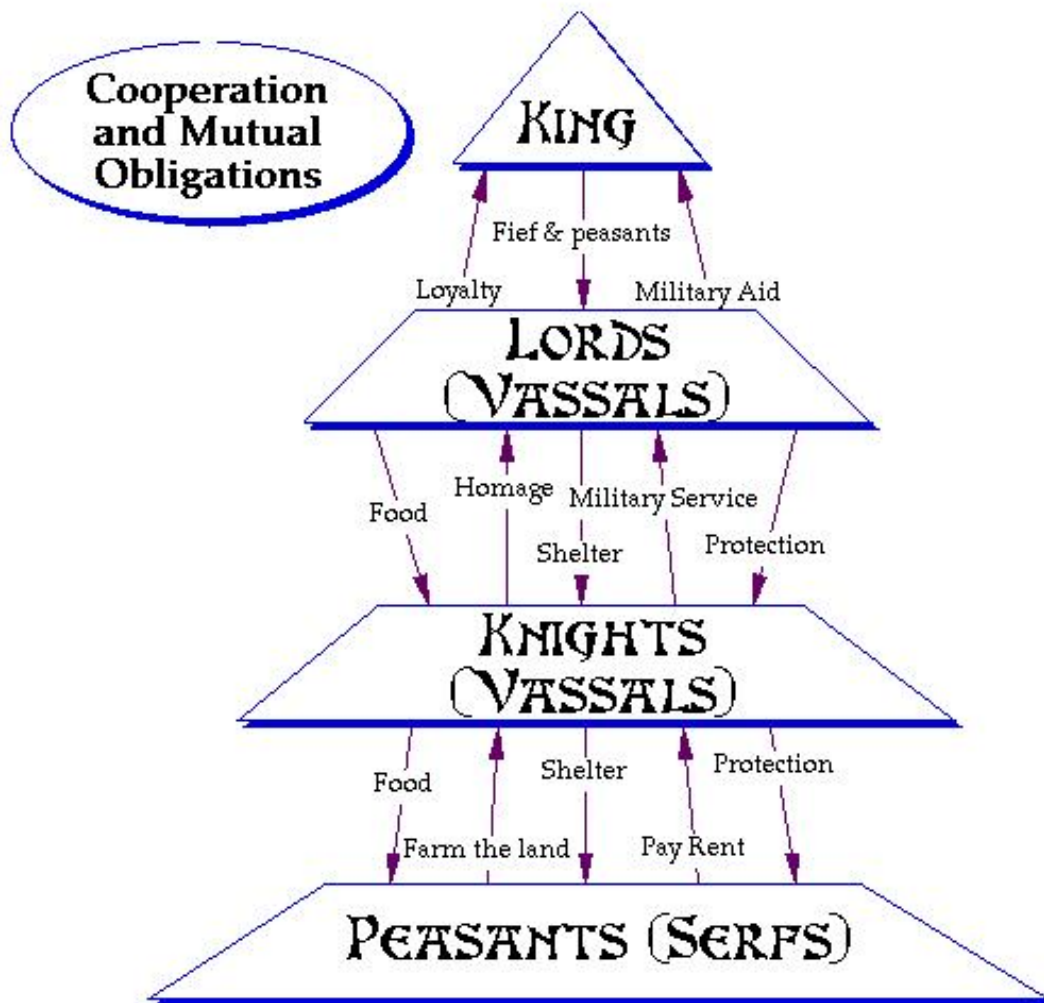
The harvests did not become dependable until 1320s. It took longer to recover from the famine for several reasons. First, there was a scarcity of the grain used as seed for new crops. In 1317, there was so little food, that starving people had eaten much of seeds for grain. A bushel of seed was needed 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.

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.

Graphic of Feudal Society

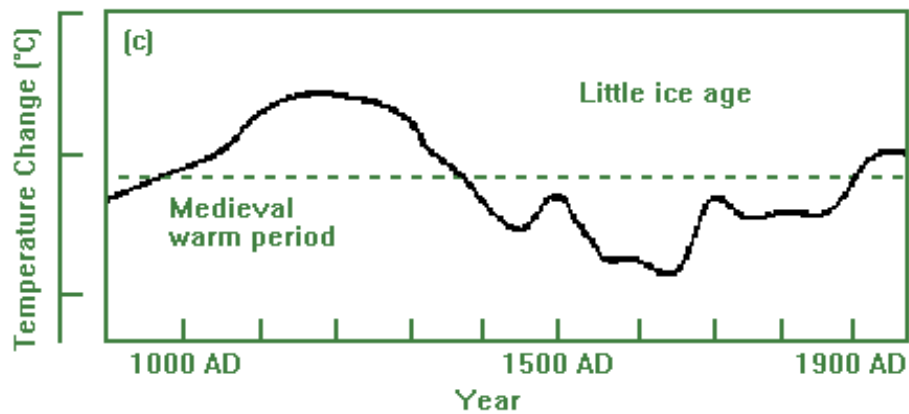


Name _____

Medieval Europe Temperature and Population Worksheet

Directions: Examine the data provided about the temperature and population of Europe during the Middle Ages. Respond to the questions. As you are looking at this data, be thinking about what questions the data raises in your mind about this time period.

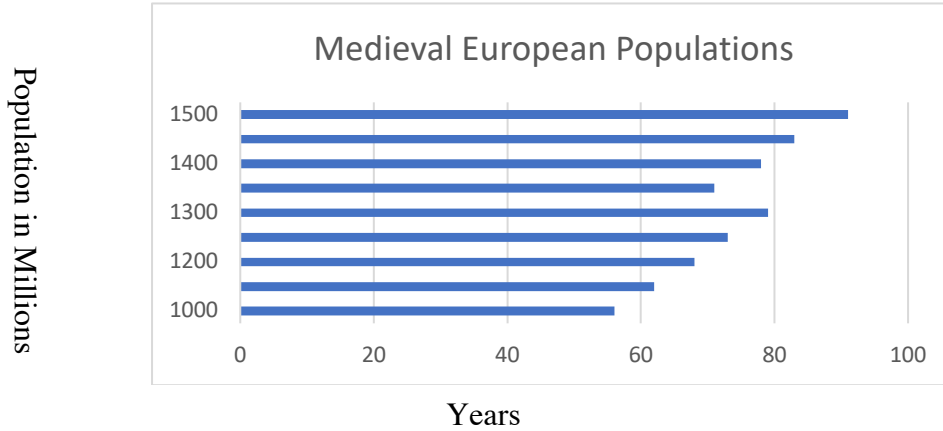
Global temperature since 900 AD



1. Place an **X** on the line graph where the famine of 1315 would have taken place.
2. Explain the trend (general direction the line is moving) you notice in temperature from 900 AD to 1500 AD.
3. What do you notice about temperature change in 1315?
4. Do you suppose temperature change affects crop growth? Why? Or Why not?

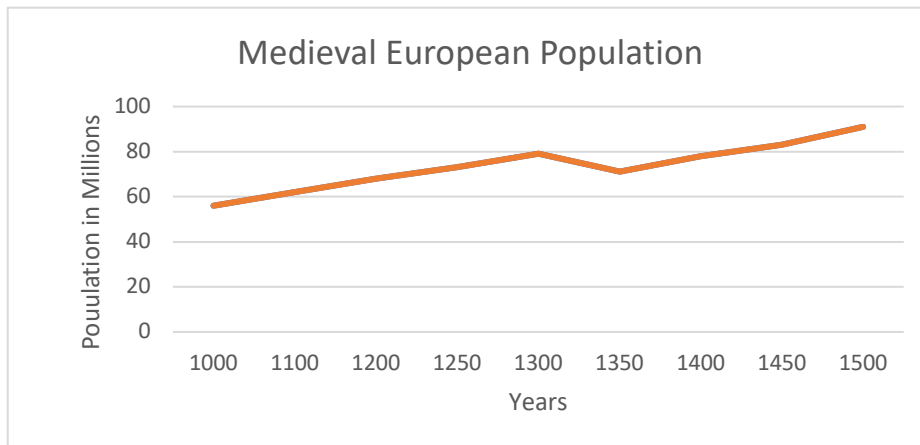
Name _____

BAR GRAPH A bar graph is a visual display used to compare the amounts or frequency (number of times) of an occurrence of different characteristics of data. It is used to compare groups of data, and to make generalizations about the data quickly. This bar graph is comparing the amount of population at certain times.



1. What was the population of Europe in 1300?
2. How much did the population decrease from 1300 to 1350?
3. What time period showed the largest growth in population?

LINE GRAPH A line graph is a visual comparison of how two variables—shown on the x- and y-axes—are related or vary with each other. This graph is showing changes in population over time.



1. List some possible reasons why the population grew steadily from 1000 AD to about 1300 AD?
2. List some possible causes for a drop in population in the 1300's?

Answer Key

Medieval Europe Temperature and Population Worksheet

Global Temperature Graph

1. It goes up and then drops and goes up just a little before 1500.
2. Dropping below the average temperature.
3. Yes, as climate changes the types of crops that can be grown must be changed.

Bar Graph

1. About 78 million
2. About 8-10 million
3. From 1450-1500 AD

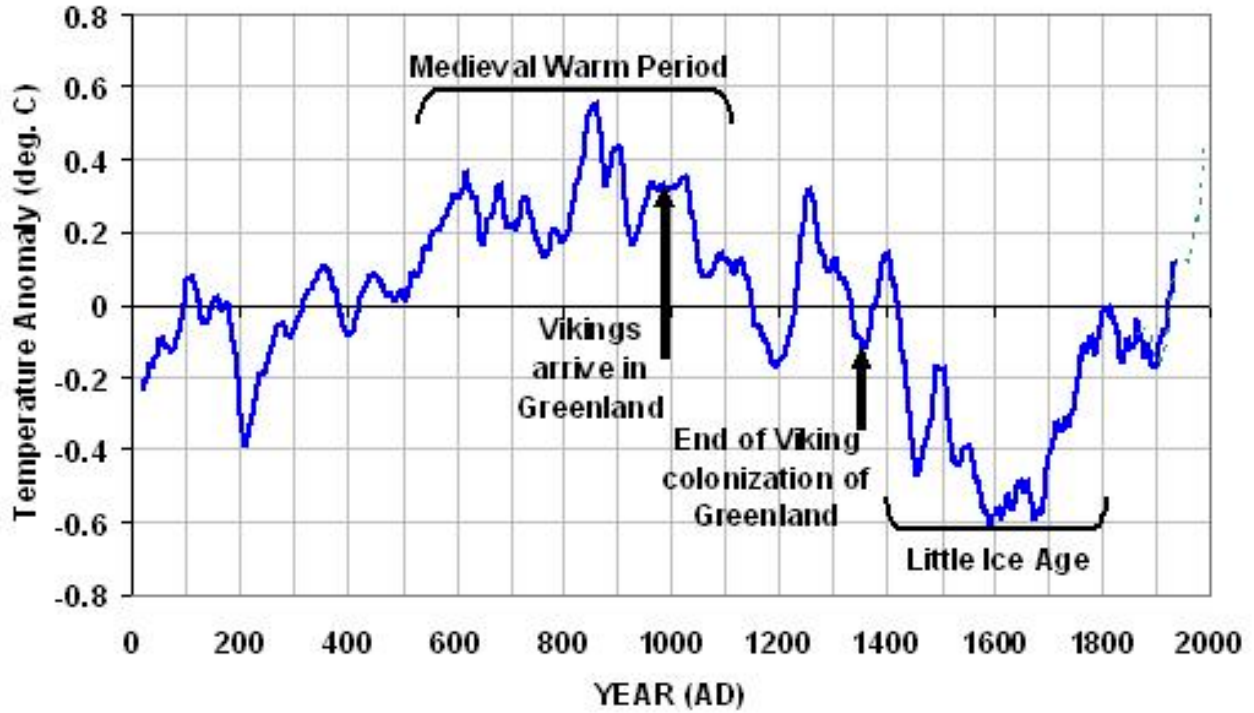
Line Graph

1. specialization, good weather, good food supply, less wars, less sickness, longer life span
2. war, food shortage, sickness, temperatures dropping, little food, bad weather, sickness, war

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medieval_demography

Year ↕	Total European population, millions ↕	European population from years 1000-1500 by country or region in millions									
		1000 ↕	1100 ↕	1200 ↕	1250 ↕	1300 ↕	1350 ↕	1400 ↕	1450 ↕	1500 ↕	
1000	56.4	5.4	6.4	7.3	8	9.1	8.5	9.6	10.2	10.8	
1100	62.1	9	11	13	15	17	15	14	14	15.5	
1200	68.0	1.6	1.8	2.3	2.6	3	2.4	3	3.3	3.6	
1250	72.9	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.3	0.4	0.5	0.6	
1300	78.7	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.8	
1350	78.7	7	7.5	8	9	10	8	10	10.5	11	
1400	78.1	9	8	7	6.5	6	5	6	7	8.5	
1450	83.0	5.4	6.2	7.2	8	9	8	9	10	11.5	
1500	90.7	7	7.5	8	8	8	7	8	8	8	
		Denmark	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6
		Sweden	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.65
		Norway	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3
		Switzerland	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.75
		Belgium	0.6	0.7	0.9	1	1.2	1	1.2	1.3	1.5
		Netherlands	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.8	0.9	0.8	0.9	1.1	1.3
		North-Eastern Europe ^[c]	8.5	10	11	11	11	12	13	14	15.1
		Georgia	3.5	5.6	7.3	6.4	4.9	4.5	3.1	3.4	2.8
		Others ^[d]	<0.1	<0.1	<0.1	<0.1	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
		Total	56.4	62.1	68	72.9	78.7	70.7	78.1	83	90.7

2,000 Years of Global Temperatures



<http://www.drroyspencer.com/global-warming-background-articles/2000-years-of-global-temperatures/>

***Hansel and Gretel* and the Great Famine of 1315**

Discussion Questions

Folktales are stories that have been told orally for generations. They are often based on real historical events and geographical settings. Folktales are based on the lives and imaginations of the storytellers.

In the early 1800's two brothers, Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, from Germany began to record these stories and published them in a book. The reason they began to publish these old German folktales was to preserve German culture. These folktales were a way of passing down lessons such as:

- Keep your promises
- Don't talk to strangers/Don't take candy from strangers
- Work hard
- Obey your parents
- Think before you act

Think about the story Hansel and Gretel and discuss the following questions:

1. What evidence in the story gives you a clue this story took place during a time of famine? (2 pts)
2. How do the actions of the parents compare with the actual actions of the people living during this time period? (2 pts)
3. What does the story tell you about living conditions during this time period? (2 pts)
4. What conclusions can you draw about the "forests" during this time? (2 pts)
5. Do you think the actions of the parents would be acceptable today? Why or why not? (2 pts)

A Folktale, a Famine, and a Finale Final Assessment

Name: _____

Directions: Use all the information provided during this lesson to explain the result (Effect) for each event (Cause) listed below. Use the Evidence box to provide support from the information provided.

Cause	Effect	Evidence
The population was increasing before the famine . . .		
The climate changed. . .		
The nobles/government could not provide for the peasants . . .		
There were food shortages . . .		
The cost of food increased . . .		
There were fewer peasants after the famine . . .		
Create your own:		

Answer Key A Folktale, a Famine, and a Finale Final Assessment

BIG IDEAS -- look to see that students understand:

Climate affected food availability.

Cause	Effect Possible answers:	Evidence
The population increased before the famine . . .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More land was used for raising crops • The land was overused • More people needed food • Plenty of peasants to do the work • Landowners became richer 	
The climate changed. . .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rainy weather made difficult to grow crops • End of Medieval warm period • No food -- people starved 	
The nobles/government could not provide for the peasants . . .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No food – people starved • Had to find food wherever they could • Peasants revolted • Nobles could not meet their feudal obligation to the peasants 	
There were food shortages . . .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People starved, became weak • People looked for food in forests • People turned to criminal activity 	
The cost of food increased . . .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People starved • People turned to crime • People ate whatever they could find • Left the estates to look for jobs 	
There were fewer peasants after the famine . . .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peasants were weakened and sickly -- couldn't work as hard • Nobles lost power over the peasants and helped end feudal system 	
Create your own:		

Famine helped change society in Europe -- less need for feudalism.

Famine resulted in the death of millions of people.