

Call for Papers

Before the Anthropocene: Medieval concepts of interdependent human-nature-relations

Leeds (UK), International Medieval Congress 2021: Climates

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In recent decades, climate history and historical climatology have focused on the economic and social impacts of long-term climatic changes like those which occurred during the Medieval Climate Anomaly or the Little Ice Age. Contemporary worries about global climate patterns have posed new, urgent questions to historians of climate: How did past societies perceive periods of rapid climate change? To what extent were they affected—not only economically, but also in their thinking about the relationship between humans and nature? Traditionally, climate history has focused on reconstruction and impact studies, which implies all too often a one-way relationship: Nature influencing human societies, with humanity merely reacting.

With the emergence of the concept of the Anthropocene, humanity has been recognized as a geological force responsible for fundamental and lasting changes of nature, not least concerning weather conditions via anthropogenic climate change. This raises questions about the degree of reciprocity and interdependence in the relationship between humans and nature. The human ability to reflect about its own agency regarding the course of nature, or the idea that humanity and nature share a common history, have been acknowledged as a postmodern disruption of established explanations of socio-natural relationships (D. Chakrabarty).

However, the distinction between the course of nature and the course of history has been established only since the eighteenth century and recent research made it clear that past societies were already able to think reflexively on their impact on the global environment. Indeed, premodern societies in general and medieval contemporaries in particular, had a very different view: they often assumed that human behavior influenced natural conditions, particularly weather. These assumptions were mediated in religious concepts that crossed into the spheres of politics and economy. Both European and non-European societies accepted the notion that "bad" human actions would backlash in inclement weather while "good" behavior would lead to benevolent conditions. Not only in a Christian context has this relationship often been interpreted by historians rather simplistically as a "retributive theology". Nevertheless, this cosmological background held much greater social implications, as medieval populations assumed they had a causal influence on weather conditions, and *vice versa*. A recent example of such an approach has been a new study by Jean-Pierre Devroey on the "righteousness" (*droiture*) of the Carolingian emperors as a major feature of rulership at that time. Devroey convincingly demonstrates that eighth- and ninth-century thinkers shared a common theory of the "cosmic"

dimension of the king that clearly connected good government with the fortune of weather and, consequently, harvests. In the end, he proposes that Carolingian legal-administrative reforms were chronologically connected to bad harvests caused by climate stress and hence constituted a direct political implication of this theoretical background.

The medieval interdependency of humans and nature plays out on at least two different levels: On the one hand, scholars' written discourses—e.g. treatises, chronicles, letters, and homilies, etc.—give insight into the underlying theories, at least from the point of view of the elites, of the relationship between humanity and nature from Late Antiquity to the end of the Middle Ages in Europe and other parts of the world. On the other hand, sources on economic, infrastructural, and social/institutional history provide information, albeit indirectly, on periods of short-term climate change, as these periods eventually called for specific social adaptation processes. This documentation not only sheds light on the practical reactions of past societies facing abrupt phases of climate change but also enables us to identify underlying theoretical assumptions. Subsequently, this would allow to reconstruct societal adaptations and to examine, at the same time, how specific perceptions of nature shaped these reactions.

To address these issues, we welcome papers dealing with all areas of the globe and from scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. The following questions might serve as possible starting points for paper proposals:

- To what extent was the interaction between humans and nature—for example, in phases of rapid climate change in the medieval period—truly seen as reciprocal?
- If the courses of history and nature are not separated in medieval mentalities, to what degree do contemporary witnesses credit natural events with influencing the course of human history?
- To what extent were natural extreme events used to argue for specific social, economic, religious, and political goals?
- Was this influence of humans on nature always limited to the context of simple retributive theology, or are other established cultural patterns decisive?
- Were pragmatic, seemingly modern, i.e. "technocratic" reactions (like institutional reform and infrastructural responses) to natural extreme events in accordance or at odds with religious and cultural discourses?

Thanks to a generous support by our Leipzig-based home institution, the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO), we will be able to provide limited funds to reimburse the conference fees and other costs for early career researchers from Eastern and Eastern Central Europe.

A publication of the conference papers is planned. We encourage interested colleagues to submit 300 words abstracts for 20-minute papers by 20 September 2020. Please submit them by e-mail to: martin.bauch@leibniz-gwzo.de