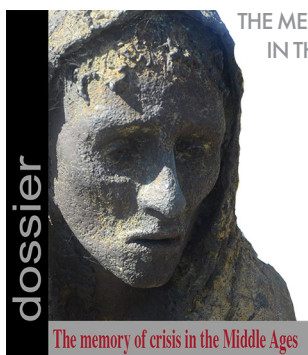




THE MEMORY OF CRISIS
IN THE MIDDLE AGES
DOSSIER
- ARTICLE -

dossier

The memory of crisis in the Middle Ages

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THE MEMORY OF CRISIS IN THE MIDDLE AGES: AN INTRODUCTION¹

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Abstract

This introductory article to the dossier *The Memory of Crisis in the Middle Ages* examines the concept of crisis, focusing on its historiographical and literary remembrance. It examines how crises, such as famines, epidemics and natural disasters, were recorded, interpreted and transmitted in medieval sources. The crisis is presented as an intellectual and historiographical construct, that evolved according to social and political contexts. The article also explores the memory of solutions to crises, and the role of visual and written sources in the shaping this memory. Finally, the article critiques the modern use of the concept of crisis in the analysis of medieval sources, emphasizing the need for an interdisciplinary approach.

Keywords

Crisis – Memory – Middle Ages – Historiography – Social responses

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DOSSIÊ
A MEMÓRIA DAS CRISES
NA IDADE MÉDIA
- ARTIGO -

A memória das crises na Idade Média

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A MEMÓRIA DAS CRISES NA IDADE MÉDIA: UMA INTRODUÇÃO

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Resumo

Este artigo introdutório ao dossiê *A Memória das crises na Idade Média* explora o conceito de crise, com foco em sua memória historiográfica e literária. Ele examina como as crises, como fomes, epidemias e desastres naturais, foram registradas, interpretadas e transmitidas em fontes medievais. A crise é apresentada como uma construção intelectual e historiográfica, evoluindo de acordo com os contextos sociais e políticos. O artigo também explora a memória das soluções para as crises e o papel das fontes visuais e escritas na construção dessa memória. Por fim, o artigo critica o uso moderno do conceito de crise na análise de fontes medievais, enfatizando a necessidade de uma abordagem interdisciplinar.

Palavras-Chave

Crises – Memória – Idade Média – Historiografia – Respostas sociais



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La mémoire des crises au Moyen Âge

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LA MÉMOIRE DES CRISES AU MOYEN ÂGE: UNE INTRODUCTION

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Résumé

Cet article d'introduction au dossier *La mémoire des crises au Moyen Âge* explore le concept de crise, en mettant l'accent sur sa mémoire historiographique et littéraire. Il examine comment les crises, telles que les famines, épidémies et catastrophes naturelles, ont été enregistrées, interprétées et transmises dans les sources médiévales. La crise est présentée comme une construction intellectuelle et historiographique, évoluant selon les contextes sociaux et politiques. L'article explore également la mémoire des solutions apportées aux crises, ainsi que le rôle des sources visuelles et écrites dans la construction de cette mémoire. Enfin, l'article critique l'utilisation moderne du concept de crise dans l'analyse des sources médiévales, en insistant sur la nécessité d'une approche interdisciplinaire.

Mots-clés

Crises – Mémoire – Moyen Âge – Historiographie – Réponses sociales

For many years, historians have used the notion of «crisis» to analyze phenomena such as famines, epidemics, military conflicts and economic depressions, as well as numerous natural (including climatic) disasters. Nevertheless, the frequency and scale of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the disintegration of the international order established after the Second World War are so present in our reality that we sometimes forget we are also dealing with a phenomenon that is an intellectual construct.

It is also a historiographical construct. In medieval Latin, *crisis* (from the Greek *krisis*, meaning judgment or decision) referred to the moment when the symptoms of an illness manifested themselves most violently. In this sense, the term continued to appear in medical treatises in the 16th century, from where it passed into political vocabulary to designate conflict, and then, at the end of the 18th century, into economic analysis, with the meaning of crisis or threat to the health of the economy. However, the term crisis was not widely used by economists until the second half of the 19th century, with the first crises of capitalism and the first attempts to explain them scientifically. Among these was the economist Clément Juglar's «Des crises commerciales et de leur retour périodique en France, en Angleterre et aux États-Unis» (1862), a work devoted to the commercial and financial crises of capitalism. Juglar demonstrated that the economic crises of capitalism were not chance events or due to contingencies, but part of an inexorable cyclical fluctuation of commercial, industrial and financial activity, and that periods of growth and crisis succeeded one another (FURIÓ, 2015, pp. 170-178).

Reinhardt Koselleck identified two levels of «crisis»: the realm of concrete experience and that of concepts. As he demonstrated, concrete experiences and concepts do not constitute two hermetically separate dimensions of social life. The diverse meanings of concepts express social practices and, conversely, the diverse practices conditioned by these concepts transform the meanings of the concepts themselves. Koselleck reminds us of something essential, namely that conceptual formulations of crisis do not belong solely to the realm of ideas, but constitute frameworks of reference by which the actors of each era orient their actions and perceptions (KOSELLECK, 1988). The notion of crisis thus becomes a tool of social history: it is both an expression of lived experiences within the sphere of social relations, and a tool capable of acting on these relations. In this sense, the concept of crisis is far from static; specialists' understanding of it evolves in line with new consensuses or dissensuses that are built up and broken down.

It is highly probable that the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 helped to reinforce the idea in intellectual and academic circles in Western Europe and the USA that the «crisis» did not so much mean the «end of the world» (with the threat of nuclear apocalypse) as the collapse of an economic model founded on planning,

centralization and state ownership, and the victory of liberal democracy and the market economy. Indeed, a more «optimistic» view of the crisis was widespread in historical research until the end of the first decade of the 2000s, a period coincided to the triumph of the «liberal order» and the «pax americana». Between the 1990s and the 2010s, many historians even abandoned the concept of crisis as a tool for interpreting the history of societies, or questioned well-established concepts in post-World War II historiography, such as the «crisis of the late Middle Ages» (EPSTEIN, 2000; DRENDEL, 2015). Where the concept persisted was still used, it came to be understood as a synonym for renewal, stripped of all the negative and even catastrophic connotations that had marked the period between the two world wars.⁶ Historians abandoned the idea of systemic crisis in the same way that they had, for the most part, abandoned Marxism as a general framework of interpretation.

Bryan Ward-Perkins provides a valuable counterpoint to this trend: he is one of the few scholars of the early centuries of our era to employ the notion of crisis as a synonym for decline (WARD-PERKINS, 2006).⁷ The fact remains that those who study the material culture of the period do not always share the optimism of textual historians, or that this material culture can give rise to very different interpretations. Working with similar evidence, Chris Wickham points to a decline in the quality of products circulating in the West from the 6th century onwards, as well as a contraction in the scope of these circuits. But at the same time, he praises the quality of life of the peasants, «liberated» from the fiscal yoke of Rome, while Ward-Perkins, on the contrary, sees the impoverishment of this material culture as a sign of worsening living conditions (WICKHAM, 2005). Even more pessimistically, Joachim Henning has argued that there is no evidence of significant economic activity throughout the VIIIth and IXth centuries (HENNING, 2007, p. 3-40), in contrast to the optimism of historians who, like Pierre Toubert, refer to this period as that of a «first European economic boom».

Despite the objections of some archaeologists, the concept of «transformations» has largely supplanted that of «crisis» in explaining the end of the Roman Empire.

⁶ This is what we read, for example, in one of Jacques Le Goff's latest books (2003, p. 140): «...and I use the term 'crisis' as little as possible, as it often masks the absence of any effort to analyze changes in a society. On the contrary, I believe that there have been mutations and turning points». Or in Hans-Werner Goetz's conclusion to his book *Les élites au Moyen Âge: crises et renouvellements* (2006, p. 487; 494-495): «_»...there have always been changes, dangers, then crises and, subsequently, renewals.... However, several contributions in the volume have provided evidence of short-term renewals of the same elites (individuals and groups) after (and despite) a crisis. In this respect, a 'renewal' (or permanent renewals) seems to have been more characteristic of the early Middle Ages than a crisis».

⁷ See also Donald A. Xerxa's powerful interview with the author (2006, pp. 31-33).

This shift is due to the impact of one of the largest collective projects of recent decades. Funded by the European Science Foundation, the *Transformations of the Roman World* project was devoted to the study of the «transition» (seen as a gradual process) between the Late Roman Empire and the High Middle Ages, and resulted in the publication of fourteen volumes! One of the consequences of this emphasis on the notion of adaptation is that it has ended up excluding or relegating to the background phenomena such as those highlighted by Chris Wickham regarding the material culture of communities in the Mediterranean region.⁸

The economic and financial crisis of 2008 and the pandemics of 2020 have profoundly influenced our perception of crisis, and not only on our perception of contemporary societies. Without necessarily adopting a deterministic perspective, we must acknowledge that the crisis, and even the collapse, are fuelling our vision of the world, within a profoundly pessimistic context marked by pandemics, economic crisis, the climate emergency, widening social inequalities, intensifying migratory flows, military conflicts and food insecurity. In other words, crisis, understood as a profound transformation of societies, has become the prevailing paradigm. This new emphasis has sometimes led to studies that has paid little or no attention to communities' social responses to crises. An illustrative example, is Kyle Harper's much-debated book, which presents an analysis of the fall of the Roman Empire, essentially from the cold climate that may have facilitated the spread of devastating pathogens and pandemics, within a context of the rapid mobility of people and goods resulting from Roman «globalization» (HARPER, 2017). In a very different register, other studies underscore the social mechanisms of community resilience and vulnerability as key to understanding social change. For example, in 2014, Daniel Curtis published the book *Coping with Crisis*, in which he questions the fragility to environmental crises of pre-modern institutions (CURTIS, 2014). More recently, Jean-Pierre Devroey, in his book *La nature et le roi*, explored the relationship between power and representations of the environment in Carolingian times (DEVROEY, 2019). In 2024, we published a thematic dossier aimed at presenting a general overview of historiography on climate change in the Middle Ages. The focus was not on the changes themselves, but on how communities responded to them (CANDIDO DA SILVA; NEWFIELD, 2024).

It's important to note that the notion of crisis has played a fundamental role in the collaborative work of the coordinators of this dossier, at least since 2016. In that year, Alexis Wilkin and Marcelo Candido da Silva organized a doctoral school

⁸ See WILKIN, 2019 and CANDIDO DA SILVA, 2017.

entitled «Crises: an interdisciplinary approach», which brought together young researchers from the University of São Paulo, the State University of Campinas and the Université Libre de Bruxelles (CANDIDO DA SILVA; JAUMAIN, ALMEIDA, LOUAULT, 2020). In January 2018, they organized a colloquium at the École française de Rome (EFR), entitled «Regards croisés sur les crises médiévales» (CANDIDO DA SILVA; WILKIN, 2019). Pere Benito i Monclús and Alexis Wilkin's collaboration dates back to the colloquium «Handling ancient and medieval sources about famines» (Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2012), and has intensified notably through the unfolding of the MERCALMED research project on merchant integration in the western Mediterranean (2017-2021), one of whose three colloquia was held in Brussels in November 2019. In 2022, Dominique Castex joined the team, contributing with her expertise in the fields of archaeology and archaeoethnatology. In 2022, this expanded team proposed a program of activities to the EFR, which was supported by the institution, as well as by the project «Beyond the Black Death. Epidemics and Mortality Crises in Northeastern Iberia, 11th-16th centuries: Reconstructing Cycles, Measuring Effects, Analysing Responses» (EPIDEMED) from the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, and by the EPIFAME network.⁹ We organized the first scientific meeting in Rome in November 2022, entitled «Epidemics and mortality crises in medieval and modern Europe (1): issues and multidisciplinary research perspectives». This interdisciplinary event, with the participation of historians, economic historians, demographers, archaeologists and paleo-geneticists, offered a preliminary overview of the major infectious epidemics of the past, their societal repercussions and, in particular, the major mortality crises they sometimes provoked, an initial assessment that was subsequently exploited over the following years. In April 2023, a meeting of Italian and French researchers at the EFR strengthened international collaboration aimed at preparing an application to the École's call for thematic networks, and the organization of a second colloquium at the Université Libre de Bruxelles on September 20, 21 and 22, 2023. Entitled «Epidemics and mortality crises in medieval and modern Europe (2): the memory of health and subsistence crises», this event was devoted to the question of the memory of medieval and modern mortality crises approached from a clearly interdisciplinary angle, at the interface of history, archaeology and biology. In 2024, a third international symposium entitled «Epidemics and mortality crises in medieval and modern Europe (3): chronology and social-demographic and economic effects of epidemics» was held at the Universitat de Lleida from June

⁹ <http://epifame.fflch.usp.br>

19 to 21 . In 2026, the fourth edition of our international meetings will be held at the University of São Paulo, on the theme of the spatialization and circulation of epidemics, famine situations and, more generally, the mortality crises they may have caused in the course of history.

We have chosen to focus on the memory of crises in the Middle Ages as the theme of this issue for several reasons. First, despite the growing scholarly interest in crises, the memory of these events remains relatively underexplored by historians.¹⁰ Second, the experience of the Brussels colloquium in September 2023 convinced us of the need to share the results of the participants' reflections to a wider audience. Finally, the memory of crises constitutes the central theme of the Thematic Research Network that has been part of the École française de Rome's activities since January 2025.¹¹ This network aims to place the School at the center of an active inter-institutional dynamic, bringing together teams already funded (Ministry of Research in Spain - MORTALITAS project, FAPESP in Brazil, FNRS-FRS in Belgium, ANR PSCHET project in France, ECOMED collaborative research project in France, and the EPIFAME research networks) all of which are engaged in the study of crises from an interdisciplinary perspective. Most of these teams focus on the Mediterranean basin (with Italy, the Iberian Peninsula and southern France as priority areas), but they also include researchers from northern Europe, where the tradition of crisis studies is very much alive, offering a rich comparative and methodological perspective. Each team responds to a broader research program, which the network aims to focus on the specific but ambitious theme of crisis memory, examined in its material, political and cultural dimensions.

For this dossier, we have enlisted the collaboration of several colleagues who participated in the Brussels 2023 symposium, which brought together researchers in history and archaeoanthropology who share the same desire to understand mortality crises and, in particular, epidemic phenomena in ancient societies from the point of view of the construction of memory. Our aim, more text-oriented here, is to analyze how a literary and historiographical memory of epidemics and mortality crises was constructed in the Middle Ages, highlighting the processes by which it was elaborated on the basis of medieval communities' lived experiences of crisis.

If the concept of crisis requires, as we have already emphasized, a critical approach, the notion of memory also deserves a few comments, which we

¹⁰ However, there are signs of interest in later periods: see DE ZWARTE; BLANCO, 2025.

¹¹ <https://www.efrome.it/reseaux-thematiques-de-recherche>

cannot fully develop here for reasons of space.¹² Over the past few decades, the omnipresence of the concept of memory - to the extent that work on memory now claims to form a historiographical field in its own right, *Memorial Studies* - does little to conceal conceptual imprecision. In some cases, the «memory» of a past event is confused with a community's shared «representation» of it, in short, with the more or less sedimented traces of the past in collective consciousness. To speak clearly, the historian would no doubt have to clarify what he means: is the memory he is aiming at simply the reminiscence of a phenomenon which, by its spectacular nature, has marked an individual or a community, and which is maintained through time? Is it a process that seeks to preserve a memory or a relationship with a past (real, imagined or mythologized), to be able to find it in one's recollections, to activate or reactivate it, by recording it in writing, or keeping it visible and manifest to others? In some cases, «memory» and «historicity» of an event may assume different meanings. Memory would be the constructed remembrance of certain constitutive episodes that shape and influence collective identity (great, heroic or tragic, founding moments); this constructed remembrance is distinctly referred to in French as «commémoration». These are reactivated and maintained by power or an institution (in the manner of the places of memory evoked by Pierre Nora, which nourish the collective memory described in the seminal work of Maurice Halbwachs). Memory is thus shaped, even more profoundly than historical narrative, which is itself obviously subject to organization and manipulation before the emergence of a «scientific» and (supposedly) explanatory or narrative history, rather than an ideological one.

The scales of memory operate on several levels: memory can be individual (and in this case the field of memory studies is concerned with the didactic and cognitive processes that fix memories and seek to anchor representations). For historians, it is most often collective, in the processes mentioned above, at very different levels (close-knit or extended families, communities). As we shall see later, it involves its inseparable double, forgetting, whether voluntary or accidental, in

¹² The literature on the subject is immense: we refer in particular and without any pretension to exhaustiveness to a classic: Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge, 1990. G. SCHWEDLER, *A cultural history of memory in the Middle Ages*, London [u.a.], 2021 (The cultural histories series), especially the Introduction, pp. 1-16; Elma Brenner, Meredith Cohen and Mary Franklin-Brown ed, *Memory and Commemoration in Medieval Culture*, Routledge, 2013; Flocel Sabaté, ed, *Memory in the Middle Ages: Approaches from Southwestern Europe*. Amsterdam University Press, 2021 and see also the numerous works collected in O.G. OEXLE AND *al.*, *Oexle: Die Wirklichkeit und das Wissen*, Göttingen, 2011. In general, the question of commemorating and remembering the dead has been particularly investigated, as has the question of the relationship between writing (historiography and pragmatic writing) and memory.

short, the moment when memory fails. And, of course, the individual and collective dimensions are closely intertwined, since the individual can hardly detach himself or herself from the social dynamics within which they evolve.

These few examples suffice to remind us of the plasticity of a concept that we mobilize, but whose limits we are well aware of. It is clear that the crisis, as an object of memory, brings into play, sometimes simultaneously, many of the meanings of memory discussed above : a traumatic event may be inscribed in individual memories, or repressed; it is a historiographical object, recorded or ignored by chroniclers and observers, and thus becomes an issue of power (religious and political), susceptible to multiple interpretations and resonances. This is all the more true given that health and subsistence crises also conjure up foundational biblical narratives, one of the essential authorities of medieval society. They can leave their mark on the «memorial landscape», whether monumental or artistic. What interests us even more, and will be detailed later, is the way in which crises, which are systemic tests, may also have fostered processes of learning or contributed to the gradual construction of a collective memory of the solutions developed to confront them.

First of all, the memory of crises concerns the way in which these events are recorded in written sources (narrative sources - chronicles, annals, memoirs, etc. - These include narrative sources (chronicles, annals, memoirs, etc.), literary sources, a wide variety of practical documents, wills, municipal deeds, royal chancery registers, parish death registers and so on. Naturally, this material conditions the historian's work, who take written or material sources and transform them into secondary discourse. The aim is therefore to reflect on the «first stage» in the construction of memory. We'll be looking at the moment when episodes of famine or epidemic are recorded in narrative sources, and then in practical documents. This is a foundational stage, since it conditions both the way in which past societies will keep a living or fossilized trace of crises; and because it radically imprints its mark on the subsequent work of the historian, who faces many difficulties in overcoming the blind spots and ideological orientations of the sources.

In his article, Albert Reixach examines narrative sources from the western territories of the Crown of Aragon (Catalonia, Aragon, Valencia and Mallorca) to identify traces of epidemics between the late 13th and late 16th centuries. He analyzes how these episodes were described, highlighting specific events and the deliberate effort made to construct a historical memory of epidemics, particularly the plague. His study explores the evolution of narrative sources, such as chronicles and institutional journals, underscoring the role of notaries and clerics in the production of these documents. It highlights the demographic impact of epidemics, notably the Black Death of 1348, considered the greatest demographic catastrophe of the Middle

Ages, as well as other major waves, including those of 1362, 1375, 1410, 1475, 1507, 1515 and 1589. The article also points out shortcomings in the systematization of data and in the construction of a written memory of epidemics. Until the 16th century, efforts to document these events were limited, with priority given to other crises, such as political conflicts and food shortages. From the 16th century onwards, there was a diversification of narrative sources and better documentation of practical measures against epidemics.

Reflecting on the ways in which crises are recorded does not entail alapse into literary post-modernism. Rather, it's about guarding against the gross or subtle traps set by sources, particularly narrative sources. It's true that, since around 1980, the post-modern or narrative-historical turn has claimed to resize historical work, recognizing it as nothing more than the «production of a narrative»; the historian is said to be above all a literary figure, based on another past narrative (WHITE, 1987). The texts in this dossier refuse to reduce history to a metadiscourse on the past. But working on the crisis obviously implies integrating an awareness of the limits of ancient texts, their codes, their literary figures and their genre bias. Two particular dangers, can be noted here, which are, in fact, two sides of the same coin.

Until around the 12th century in much of Europe, most famines and health crises are mentioned in narrative sources.¹³ The failure of historians to take literary genres into account is problematic: one cannot simply write about crises by «harvesting» references to famines and epidemics in catalog form, without understanding the prism of analysis that determines the project underlying the narrative. This is precisely the criticism that Philippe Leveau has directed at Kyle Harper, for example, in his naive use of eschatological texts written by Late Antique bishops depicting social, military or environmental apocalypses (LEVEAU, 2022, pp. 61-83). Recent work by Jean-Pierre Devroey on the Carolingian Annals (DEVROEY, 2019), and by Steffen Patzold on the bishops of the Early Middle Ages (PATZOLD, 2008), has confirmed the extent to which narrative sources operate within frameworks that are highly dependent on a situated and ideological vision, a «program», and are naturally imbued with the *topoi* of a specific genre. Reconstructions of episodes of frenzy or health crises are obviously highly dependent on these presuppositions. Better still, their presence or absence from the narrative is directly affected. Certain silences in the sources can only be explained in terms of literary canons and the authors' aims. Likewise, when critiquing testimonies, we need to think carefully

¹³ Catalonia is an exception; we find virtually no narrative sources prior to 1200, with mentions of famine and mortality to be found in practical documents. See CURSCHMANN's catalog (1900), based almost exclusively on narrative sources.

about the «sedimentation» of memories and the relationships they can forge between generations. It's best to start with a well-known, telling example: often, in the writing of chronicles or works of fiction, subtle interplays of perspective summon biblical figures or other ancient narratives to describe a new crisis, when it occurs. Literary historians have demonstrated how much the famous prologue to Boccaccio's *Decameron* owes to Paul Diacre's *Histoire des Lombards*, written in the last decade of the 8th century (BRANCA, 1946). Yet Boccaccio had personally witnessed the crisis in Florence at first hand; do his borrowings invalidate his description of the facts? No: our contemporary obsession with originality runs the risk of misleading us into rejecting a text that uses a matrix, certainly, but is probably not without contact with the reality surrounding the Florentine writer. Throughout the centuries, literature and the arts have had the distinctive capacity to revive ancient crises, centuries after an event, and feeding them into a new work: sometimes to nourish a romanticized or mythologized vision. But also, quite simply, because ancient chronicles or biblical writings are an inexhaustible reservoir for the description of reality in Ancien Régime society: words and figures of speech are drawn from them to «help us think» about what is happening, even when it is a new event that is occurring; for example, in accounts of famines, the figures of Joseph from Genesis, or Gregory the Great, with their different attitudes to the crisis, are summoned.¹⁴ Here again, in order to «understand» the crisis, the historian must make the effort to juggle these levels of reading: otherwise, he or she will be trapped in the dichotomy between stereotyped «source», deemed irrelevant, and «first-hand» account.

Recognizing the limits of ancient texts, their codes conventions, and biases, is therefore essential for any rigorous study of past crises. . The reconstruction of episodes of social upheaval and mortality inevitably depends on the literary presuppositions embedded within narrative sources. Historians need to understand the prisms through which texts are analyzed to avoid misreading them. Literature and the arts frequently draw upon earlier crises to represent new events. The vocabulary used to record sources is fundamental. Until the 16th century, it remains difficult to establish a quantitative hierarchy of these crises, even if since the 12th century we have seen annals describing famines adding to the word *fames* the maximum prices reached by grain on the local market. This is a way of objectifying the severity of the crisis, measuring it and ranking famines. Critique of narrative sources is essential to distinguish between local, regional and inter-

¹⁴ Please refer to the work in progress by Maureen Boyard, who from late 2025 will be working on these two models and their posterity as part of a program dedicated to this question at the Ecole Française de Rome.

regional famines and epidemics. Medical retro-diagnosis is also a challenge, given the frequent imprecision of sources.

The emergence of practical everyday writings (*Pragmatische Schriftlichkeit*), extensively studied by Michaël Clanchy in a classic book, or by the research program at the University of Münster directed by Hagen Keller, is a well-known phenomenon (BERTRAND, 2015; KELLER; GRUBMÜLLER; STAUBACH, 1992, p. 283-292). The emergence of «ordinary writings» also invites reflection on those produced in «extraordinary» contexts such as the management of famine or epidemic crises. From the 13th-14th centuries the administrative and bureaucratic boom found at all levels in the West also took hold of crisis management, with documents recording deaths and illnesses. Since the XIVth century, Catalan parish death books, as well as the death registers of the Sforza's Milano, bear witness to this same development, and present an interest that should attract significant work. It's an effort that needs to be pursued, between analysis of the documentary conditions of production, concrete use of the registers, and cautious attempts to quantify the phenomena. It is by no means a new undertaking, yet it has not received the sustained attention it merits.

Focused on later «sources of practice» and quantitative data, historians of crises have tended to pay little attention to hagiographic, patristic and biblical sources, or to chronicles. For instance, Anita Guerreau-Jalabert has dismissed the use of hagiography as inherently doomed to failure because of its exclusively ideological outlook (GUERREAU-JALABERT, 2002, p. 265-266). This position is categorical, and This position too radical. Although hagiographic narratives are, by their very nature fictional constructions composed of repetitions and borrowings from other texts, they «say something» about the world in which they are set, and make use, for example, of a very rich economic lexicon, particularly when describing practices of usury, charity or hoarding, a point also noted by Valentina Tonneato. Their judicious use is indeed possible, as demonstrated by Stephane Lebecq's reflections on Frisian trade or Laurent Feller's on Geraud d'Aurillac's economic calculations (FELLER, 2017, p. 69-82; LEBECQ, 1983). Likewise, Dominique Barthélemy's recent work on the year 1000 employs hagiography, in conjunction with anthropology, to shed light on social system of medieval France (BARTHÉLEMY, 2023).

The second article in our dossier, authored by José Fonseca, examines two hagiographies produced in monastic contexts, the *Vita Iohannis abbatís Reomaensis* (VIIth century) and the *Vita Benedicti Anianensis* (IXth century), and explores the memory of food crises in premodern societies. Hagiographic narratives, a literary genre popular in the Middle Ages, served to edify and promote the cult of the saints, but they are often literary constructions rather than reliable historical accounts. The *Vita Iohannis*, attributed to Jonas de Bobbio, describes a miracle in which Abbot Jean de Réôme multiplies grain to feed the poor during a famine.

This episode, probably apocryphal, sought to enhance the abbey's prestige and present John as a model of sanctity. In contrast, the *Vita Benedicti Anianensis*, written by Ardon Smaragdus, recounts a actual famine in 793, during which Abbot Benoît d'Aniane distributed the monastery's food reserves without invoking any miracle, highlighting the self-sacrifice of the monks. The two accounts share structural similarities: announcement of the famine, description of the poor, and response from the abbey. Yet, their conclusions diverge: they end with a miracle in the *Vita Iohannis* and with collective deprivation in the *Vita Benedicti*. These differences reflect the authors' political objectives. Jonas seeks to glorify John and Columban monasticism, while Ardon highlights the *Regula Benedicti* championed by Benedict of Aniane. Hagiographic texts show that food crises were often described as catastrophic events to underline the sanctity of abbey. They served to legitimize the abbey's public role and reinforce their political and spiritual prestige, but they should not be taken as reliable historical sources on the crises themselves, even if they can occasionally offer us valuable details that are difficult to put into perspective.

Famines and epidemics are not the same phenomenon, although attributing them to supernatural causality can unite them in the minds of observers, who sometimes link the two, in sequences of catastrophe that take on meaning by reinforcing each other - contemporary historians, for their part, continue to debate vigorously the relationship between epidemic crises and famines. With this in mind, Benoît Rossignol examines the memory of frumentary (famine) and epidemic crises in the Roman Empire, from the Early Empire to Late Antiquity (1st century BCE - 6th century CE). It highlights the differences between these two types of crisis, although they are often associated. The memory of food shortages is mainly accessible through the accounts produced by elites and authorities, who record the measures taken to resolve the problems, often erasing the victims. Pestilences, on the other hand, are subject to a more structured memorial regime, influenced by the narrative of Thucydides, and often documented by literati and physicians. The article also examines the way in which crises were perceived and remembered in civic and imperial settings, particularly in Rome, where they took on a particular political and religious dimension. It highlights the importance of memory media, such as inscriptions, monuments and historiographical accounts, while noting the selection and forgetting that characterize these processes. Finally, the article looks at the evolution of memory regimes in Late Antiquity, influenced by Christianization, and highlights the way in which crises were interpreted and used to valorize certain actors, such as emperors, physicians or Christians. Major pandemics, such as those of the Antonines, the IIIrd century and Justinian, left a strong memory, while less serious crises were often forgotten.

In examining the intersections between the distant and recent past, particular attention should be paid to the «memory of crisis solutions». To what extent did medieval societies retain an effective memory of solutions or attempted solutions to crises? Bruce Campbell and Cormac Ó Grada have argued that famine could not be the subject of a truly coordinated political and economic response under the Ancien Régime, as shown by the English case (CAMPBELL; Ó GRÁDA, 2011, p. 859-886), where climatic hazards set the parameters and political as well as logistical constraints prevailed.

However, we must look beyond the question of «effectiveness» - judged, of course, by our own standards, which is a debate in itself - to consider the nature of the responses and above all, how they crossed generations. Over the centuries, certain religious measures became commonplace, in both cases: fasts and prayers, processions, the re-establishment of «moral order», supposedly to appease the heavens: these responses run through the Carolingian and Ottonian periods (in the North), and can still be found in an urban context, for example when the Plague struck Tournai in the 14th century. These practices have often been neglected by economic historians, since they have no «efficient virtue». They were, however, considered as such by contemporaries of the events, and were, one might say anachronistically, part of the crisis management mechanism. Beyond that, some efforts were made to regulate crises. We will not dwell on the proactive measures that were sometimes implemented in a rather haphazard manner : changes in cultivation practices (generalization of spelt, for example, reputed to be more resistant, or voluntary diversification of cereals), also on the ground (in the peasant world); such as the management of grain stocks in rural contexts ... For famines, the collections of Carolingian capitularies, sources primarily compiled under Charlemagne and Louis the Pious (DEVROEY, 2019; CANDIDO DA SILVA, 2014; CANDIDO DA SILVA, 2016.), show the recurrence of certain economic measures advocated at central level: their reiteration demonstrates, if not the memory of individuals, at least that of institutions, through recourse to texts and previous attitudes, no doubt shared socially between the great counts, abbots and bishops who formed the Carolingian entourage.

Néri de Barros Almeida's article examines the social and political responses to the flooding of Florence in 1333, caused by the overflowing of the Arno river. The event, described in detail by the chronicler Giovanni Villani in his *Nuova cronica*, is presented as a major crisis that shook the city materially, socially and politically. Villani associates the flood with divine judgment, while incorporating astrological explanations and criticisms of communal management, notably the construction of dams and mills that would have exacerbated the disaster. The article examines how social and historical memory shaped reactions to this crisis. It underscores

the debates surrounding the causes of the flood, involving theologians, astrologers and senior citizens, and highlights the tension between supernatural and pragmatic explanations. Although preventive measures were considered, they were abandoned in favor of economic and political interests, illustrating an inability to bring about lasting change. The study concludes that historical memory, like that transmitted by Villani, plays a crucial role in understanding and managing crises. The author suggests that the lessons drawn from this medieval event may illuminate contemporary challenges related to environmental crises, particularly in the context of climate change.

The study of the memory of crises also raises the question of how different types of sources can be meaningfully compared. François-Olivier Touati's article explores the representation and memory of epidemics in the Middle Ages, focusing on two emblematic scourges: the plague and ergotism. It examines written sources (chronicles, medical, religious and hagiographic texts) and iconography (works of art, frescoes, altarpieces) to analyze how these diseases were perceived, recorded and represented. In the absence of statistics data, historians must rely on varied and often subjective traces, shaped by psychological, cultural and geographical factors. The memory of epidemics oscillates between commemoration, denial and resilience, with a marked tendency to privilege the representation of death over that of the sick. Visual sources, often symbolic or allegorical, play a key role in the transmission of collective memory. The plague is often associated with apocalyptic representations, such as the horsemen of the Apocalypse or scenes of mass burials. The «mal des ardents», linked to ergot poisoning, is represented through the figures of mutilated patients or those in search of a cure, notably in the works of the Order of Saint Anthony. The article highlights the complexity of interpreting sources and the need to cross-reference written and visual evidence in order to grasp the impact of epidemics on medieval societies. It also highlights the evolution of representations, moving from a symbolic vision to a more realistic approach, while emphasizing the importance of memory in the management of health crises.

We cannot conclude this dossier without addressing the limits risks inherent in applying the concept of crisis to medieval sources, particularly when this concept is projected by modern historians without paying sufficient attention to the particularities of these sources. Maria Filomena Coelho's article, *Crises e fronteiras na Historia Compostellana (séc. XI-XII)*, examines the notions of «crisis» and «frontier» in the medieval context, based on the *Historia Compostellana* (HC), a chronicle of the XIth-XIIth century centered on the figure of Diego Gelmírez, first archbishop of Santiago de Compostela. The author analyzes how these concepts are employed to construct narratives of memory and political purpose in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula. The article criticizes modern historiographical

interpretations that project institutional or nationalist concepts onto the medieval past. It proposes a reading centered on the social networks and political logics of the period, and shows that modern concepts of «crisis» and «frontier» are not always suited to understanding medieval realities.

* * *

We hope that this dossier reflects at least in part, the spirit in which we have been working for several years now, one aimed at developing a global, interdisciplinary approach to the history of past mortality crises. Within this broad field, the question of the memorial anchoring of these crises remains largely unexplored. The six contributions in this dossier do not claim to provide an exhaustive answer, but they do make a significant contribution to this theme by offering, through the analysis of diverse written sources, and thanks to a rich bibliography, a first stage of discussion open to a wide audience. This initial assessment will soon be expanded to include other types of evidence, notably archaeological (burials, monuments), artistic and religious (representation of disasters and crises in art; development of ad hoc cults), which also form part of a cultural and social history of the relationship with crisis.

To these, we can add developments from other rapidly expanding fields. If, as mentioned above, memory is a phenomenon that has long been studied by social scientists and historians, notably since the seminal work of Maurice Halbwachs, forgetting is its counterpart, and is enjoying a resurgence of interest among historians.¹⁵ The process that produces forgetting is worthy of reflection: it is both an individual and collective phenomenon, resulting from the erasure of traces which is both erasure traces by the inexorable passage of time and the weakening of cognitive faculties. Yet forgetting may also stem from deliberate action, through the sorting out of information worth saving or passing on. This is precisely what is implied by the concept of «creative selection», notably manifested in the tireless bureaucratic filing of documents, such as archives, some of which are discarded, misfiled or, on the contrary, scrupulously inventoried and sorted. This process of selection, which can lead to the irretrievable disappearance of whole swathes of human experience, is not necessarily malicious. Yet it has radical effects, and operates everywhere, for everything involves a form of creative selection: already, the writing of sources, through the choice to record or keep silent about events (through the writing of chronicles, literary sources or archival documents), proceeds in the same way

¹⁵ We refer here in particular to the work of the dynamic historian Gerald Schwedler, who is working on «creative selection» and «oblivion studies» (SCHOLZ ; SCHWEDLER, 2022).

as the aforementioned operations of documentary sorting, over the course of generations. But in the absence of sorting, oblivion lurks, too, for the mass of texts is just as formidable as drastic selection, since information is drowned in quantity. Memory is thus a voluntary process, inseparable from the painstaking selection and organization of information that render it mobilizable and meaningful : there is still much to be done on the way in which crises and attempts to correct them are the object of an active safeguarding process by medieval communities.

Finally, it should be noted that the memory of crises is inseparable from another dimension: that the formation of a genuine technical «expertise» that mobilize a constructed and operational «know-how» to confront tragedies: recourse to archives, to previous solutions, the memory of what works, precedes the emergence of a formalized and articulated knowledge of crises, famines and epidemics. This is more likely to be the case in the modern era, when treatises on famine and disease are written. This crystallization of experience, theory and knowledge constitutes a legitimate field of inquiry in its own right, even if it lies beyond the scope of this dossier.

It's clear, then, that the ground we're exploring is far from fully charted, , which bodes well for promising avenues of research in the future.

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Research data availability

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The memory of crisis in the Middle Ages

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