AN AGE OF SCARCITY?

The Hours of Jeanne d’Evreux were created not long after the horrific event that historians call the Great Famine (1315–1317), one of many waves of food shortages that shook the medieval world on either side of the year 1300. The chief causes of such scarcity have traditionally been sought in demographics and declining food production. But newer research pins the blame not so much on natural factors as on human action—and inaction.

Overpopulation, Undersupply

There is certainly much to be said for the demographic argument. While around the year 1300 farms were producing more food than ever before, population growth meant that families had more hungry mouths to feed. One plot that had originally supported a single family in England was, by the end of the thirteenth century, divided into twenty tiny parcels for the progeny of the original peasant holder.

Land was similarly subdivided in France. Consider the village of Toury, about 45 miles south of Paris (Map 7.7). It originally consisted of a few peasant habitations (their houses and gardens) clustered around a central enclosure belonging to the lord, in this case the monastery of Saint-Denis (see p. 221). Nearby, across the main route that led from Paris to Orléans, was a parish church. In 1110 Suger, then a monk at Saint-Denis and provost of Toury, constructed a well-fortified castle on the site of the enclosure. In the course of the thirteenth century, encouraged both by Saint-Denis’s policy of giving out lots in return for rents and by a market granted by the king, the village grew rapidly, expanding to the east, then to the west, and finally (by the fourteenth century) to the north. Meanwhile the lands cultivated by the villagers—one called upon to support only a small number of householders—were divided into more than 5,000 parcels, which appear as tiny rectangles on Map 7.8.

In general, population growth seems to have leveled off by the mid-thirteenth century, but climatic changes wrought their own havoc. A mini ice age took hold in the north of Europe (though not in the south), leading to wheat shortages. In 1309 the cold weather was joined by an extremely wet growing season that ruined the harvest in southern and western Germany; the towns, to which food had to be imported, were hit especially hard. And yet the towns were themselves overpopulated, swollen by immigrants from the overcrowded countryside.