Medioevo Europeo

RIVISTA DI FILOLOGIA E ALTRA MEDIEVALISTICA

2/2 - 2018

Medioevo Europeo is an International Peer-Rewieved Journal

ISSN 2532-6856

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Libreria Editrice Alfani SNC, Via Degli Alfani 84/R, 50121 Firenze

progetto grafico realizzato da Gabriele Albertini

Indice

Reports and Interpretations of the English Epidemic and Famine of 1086-1087

ABSTRACT: Diverse cronache inglesi del dodicesimo e del tredicesimo secolo riportano un ciclo di carestie ed epidemie che afflisse l'Inghilterra tra il 1086 e il 1087. La presente trattazione mira a fornire uno studio esaustivo di questi eventi. Inizialmente, verranno delineate le fonti del dodicesimo e del tredicesimo secolo che riportano resoconti della carestia e dell'epidemia: la *Cronaca di Peterborough* e le *historiae* di Guglielmo di Malmesbury, John di Worcester e Enrico di Huntingdon. Nonostante siano legati dal punto di vista testuale, tali resoconti non concordano tuttavia in alcuni dettagli. In seguito, verranno analizzate le informazioni linguistiche che possono essere ricavate da queste fonti e da diversi testi medici del periodo anglosassone. Infine, verrà discusso come gli storici medievali interpretarono il ciclo di epidemia e carestia da una prospettiva morale. I resoconti preservati nella *Cronaca di Peterborough* e nella *Historia Anglorum* di Enrico di Huntingdon hanno delle implicazioni morali che potevano servire un fine didattico, interpretando la mortalità tra bestiame e popolazione come una conseguenza dell'avidità della classe dominante e specialmente di Guglielmo il Conquistatore, che morì nel 1087.

ABSTRACT: Several English chronicles of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries record a cycle of famine and epidemics that affected England from 1086 to 1087. The present essay aims to offer a comprehensive study of these events. I shall first outline the twelfth- and thirteenth-century sources for the famine and the disease, accounts of which are provided by the *Peterborough Chronicle* and by the Latin *historiae* of William of Malmesbury, John of Worcester, and Henry of Huntingdon. Although textually related, reports of the epidemic found in these sources differ in some subtle respects. The linguistic information that can be obtained from these sources and from several Anglo-Saxon medical texts will be then analysed. Finally, I shall discuss how medieval historians interpreted this cycle of epidemic and famine according from a moral standpoint. The accounts found in the *Peterborough Chronicle* and in Henry of Huntingdon's *Historia Anglorum* carry moral implications that could serve a didactic purpose, interpreting the mortality among cattle and people as a consequence of the greediness of the ruling class, and especially that of William the Conqueror, who died in 1087.

PAROLE-CHIAVE: Guglielmo il Conquistatore, Epidemie, Carestia, Cronaca Anglosassone
KEYWORDS: William the Conqueror, Epidemics, Famine, Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

1. The Events of 1086-1087

The first cycle of epidemic and famine after the Norman Conquest afflicted England in 1087, the final year of William the Conqueror's reign. These events followed a bad harvest, inclement weather, and a murrain of cattle, all occurring in 1086.[1] Although infectious diseases and starvation were by no means new to medieval Britain,[2] several medieval chronicles describe the years 1086-1087 as a season of particular misery and mortality. These events are recorded in six main sources dating from the twelfth to the thirteenth centuries:

1. The *Peterborough Chronicle*, preserved in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 636, twelfth century (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, manuscript E);[3]
2. Henry of Huntingdon's *Historia Anglorum*, begun in the first quarter of the twelfth century;[4]
3. William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, first quarter of the twelfth century;[5]
4. The *Chronicle* of John of Worcester, first half of the twelfth century;[6]
5. Symeon of Durham's *Historia regum*, preserved in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 139, late twelfth century.[7]
6. The *Waverley Annals*, early thirteenth century;[8]

A lost version of the *Peterborough Chronicle*, from which E derives, served as a source for the twelfth and thirteenth-century Latin chroniclers: an ancestor of E (or a version close to it) was used by Henry for his *Historia* and was adapted into Latin in the *Waverley Annals*, as seen in entries from 1000 to 1121 (Irvine 2004: xxxiv-xxxv; Whitelock 1964: xvii, xix; Greenway 1996: 404). Among the many sources used by William of Malmesbury for his *Gesta*, an archetype of E provided material for entries up to 1087 (Irvine 2004: xxxv; Whitelock 1964: xx-xxi). John of Worcester may also have used a version of E for his entries from 1080 onwards (Irvine 2004: xxxv-xxxvi; McGurk 1998: xxi; Whitelock 1964: xx). Symeon of Durham, in turn, based his entries from 848 to 1118 on John of Worcester (Rollason 2015: 101). Therefore, it is not surprising that

[1] See Creighton (1891: 16, 28); Bonser (1963: 63).
[2] See the list of epidemics in Creighton (1891: 15-17) and Bonser (1963: 59-63).
[3] Edition in Clark (1970); translation in Whitelock (1964).
[4] Edition and translation in Greenway (1996). Dates of the Latin chronicles are quoted from Irvine (2004: xxxiv-xxxvi).
[5] Edition in Mynors – Thomson – Winterbottom (1998–1999).
[6] Edition in McGurk (1998).
[7] Edition in Arnold (1885: 3-283).
[8] Edition in Luard (1864-1869: II, 129-411).

the accounts on the events of 1086-1087 mostly agree, although differing in some subtle details. The cycle of disease and famine of 1087, on the other hand, is not recorded in other major historical works of the period, such as Eadmer's *Historia Novorum*, Orderic's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, and Gaimar's *L'Estoire des Engleis*.

Our main witness to the events of 1086-1087 is, therefore, the *Peterborough Chronicle*. I quote an excerpt from the annal for the year 1086:

> 7 þæs ilcan geares wæs swiðe hefelic gear 7 swiðe swincfull 7 sorhfull gear innan Engelande on orfcwealme; 7 corn 7 wæstmas wæron ætstandene; 7 swa mycel ungelimp on wæderunge swa man naht æðelice geþencean ne mæg – swa stor þunring 7 lægt wes swa þet hit acwealde manige men. (Clark 1970: 9, ll. 18-23)

> And in the course of the same year, it was a very severe year, and a very laborious and sorrowful year in England, in cattle plague; and corn and crops were checked, and there was such great misfortune with the weather as cannot easily be conceived – there was such big thunderstorms and such lightning that many people were killed. (Whitelock 1964: 162)

The *orfcwealm* ('cattle-plague', 'murrain') and the tempests are also recorded in the chronicle of John of Worcester: «Eodem anno [1086] animalium pestis, et magna extitit aeris intemperies» («In the same year [1086] there was murrain among cattle and much unseasonable weather») (McGurk 1998: 44-45). William of Malmesbury writes that «in the year before the king's death there was a great mortality both of men and of beasts, severe storms, and constant lightning of a violence no man had ever seen or heard of» (Mynors – Thomson – Winterbottom 1998-1999: I, 501). Similarly, in Symeon of Durham's *Historia regum* we find that «eodem anno [1086] animalium pestis, et magna extitit aeris intemperies» (Arnold 1885: 213) («in the same year [occurred] a cattle pestilence, and there was great inclemency of weather»).[9]

However, the Latin accounts omit a detail found in the *Peterborough Chronicle*: in the year 1086, corn and crops were left standing. Therefore, the exceptional bad weather and the cattle pestilence were combined with the failure of agricultural activity. The bad weather continued throughout the following year, leading to the famine of 1087 (cf. Clark: 1970: 10; Whitelock 1964: 162). Reports of storms, murrain of cattle, and lack of corn and fruit are also preserved in the *Waverley Annals*, year 1086; in the entry for the year 1087, a relationship between tempests and famine is posited (Luard 1864-1869: II, 195-196).

Little is known of the disease that opens the chronicle entries for the year 1087. According to John of Worcester, «hoc anno [1087], primo febribus, deinde fame quamplures mortui sunt» («in this year [1087] many perished at first through fevers and later through

[9] Translations of quotations from the *Waverley Annals* are my own.

hunger») (McGurk 1998: 44-45). William of Malmesbury mentions an «epidemic fever» (*promiscua febris*) which «preyed on more than half of the ordinary population» (Mynors – Thomson – Winterbottom 1998-1999: I, 500-501). The epidemic fever was followed by a famine caused itself by the inclement weather (*intemperie aeris*), «so that survivors of the fever fell victim to hunger» (Mynors – Thomson – Winterbottom 1998-1999: I, 500-501). Henry of Huntingdon states that, in year 1087, England was affected by both sickness and starvation, as well as by storms that killed men and beasts (cf. Greenway 1996: 404-405). The *Waverley Annals* lament the unhappy state of England, ravaged by a high death-rate caused by a deadly fever (cf. Luard 1864-1869: II, 195-196). The details featured in all the above-mentioned sources are summed up in Table 1.

Table 1. Details of the famine-sickness of 1086-1087 in twelfth/thirteenth-century sources

	Peterborough Chronicle	Henry of Huntingdon	*Waverley Annals*	John of Worcester	William of Malmesbury	Symeon of Durham
Severe weather	X	X	X	X	X	X
Failure of crop	X		X			
Murrain	X	X	X	X	X	X
Fever	X	X	X	X	X	
Famine	X	X	X	X	X	

The cycle of epidemic and famine can therefore be reconstructed as follows:

1. Severe weather (year 1086, all sources);
2. Many men are killed by storms (1086, *Peterborough Chronicle* and *Waverley Annals*);
3. Murrain of cattle (1086, all sources);
4. Failure of corn and fruit crops (1086, *Peterborough Chronicle* and *Waverley Annals*);
5. Fever (1087, all sources except Symeon of Durham);
6. The bad weather continues (*Peterborough Chronicle* and *Waverley Annals*);
7. A famine follows the fever (1087, all sources except Symeon of Durham).

This reconstruction is consistent with scholarly views of the events of 1086-1087. As Creighton (1891: 28-29) notes, «it is probable from entries in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle that the aggravation […] was due to two bad harvests in succession. The year 1086 was 'heavy, toilsome and sorrowful,' through failure of the corn and fruit crops owing to an inclement season, and through murrain of cattle». In this context, it is worth noting that the bad harvests are only recorded in the *Peterborough Chronicle* and in its close Latin adaptation preserved in the *Waverley Annals*. Henry of Huntingdon, John of Worcester

and William of Malmesbury omit the failure of crops and focus on the inclement weather, the cattle plague, and the subsequent illness and famine; in Symeon of Durham, the cycle of epidemic and famine is not recorded altogether.

2. The 'Drif' of 1087

The nature of the disease that affected England in 1087 cannot be exactly determined. The only information available in our Latin sources are the *promiscua febris* and the high mortality rate.[10] However, the *Peterborough Chronicle* provides some further elements:

> Æfter ure Drihtnes Hælendes Cristes gebyrtide an þusend wintra 7 seofan 7 hundeahtatig wintra, on þam an 7 twentigan geare þæs þe Willelm weolde 7 stihte Engeland swa him God uðe, gewearð swiðe hefelic and swiðe wo[l]berendlic gear on þissum lande. Swylc coðe com on mannum þet fullneah æfre þe oðer man wearð on þam wyrrestan yfele, þet is, on ðam drife, 7 þet swa stranglice þet mænige menn swulton on ðam yfele. (Clark 1970: 10, ll. 1-8).
>
> A thousand and eighty-seven years after the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the twenty-first year since William ruled and governed England as God granted him, it became a very severe and pestilential year in this country. Such a disease came on people that very nearly every other person was ill with the worst of diseases – high fever – and that so severely that many people died of the disease. (Whitelock 1964: 162)

Fever is defined as «the worst illness», which suggests a severe form of infection, as well as a disease known to the contemporary readership of the *Chronicle*. We also know that the infection caused physical exhaustion, as it is said that «ða wreccæ men lægen fordrifene fullneah to deaðe» (Clark 1970: 10, ll. 12-13). This sentence is translated by Whitelock (1964: 162) as «the wretched people lay driven very nearly to death»; Clark (1970: 74) explains *fordrifene* with 'exhausted', arguing that the participle is «perhaps a grim pun» on the word used by the chronicler for the disease – *drif*.

Anglo-Saxons used several words to describe various conditions associated with fever. However, it is not easy to determine whether different words indicate different diseases. Along with *fefer*, a loanword from Latin *febris*, which is the most widely attested term and the one which survived into Modern English,[11] our records preserve *byrne-adl* (literally 'burning sickness')[12] and *hrið*. The former seems to refer to a condition

[10] Caution is obviously needed in evaluating historical records accounts of high mortality rates, which may be exaggerated. As noted in the history of influenza by Vaughan (1921: 3), past historians were «men who have desired to impress their readers with some idea of the horrible ravages of the disease, and who have doubtless in some instances transmitted the impression of monstrous mortality rate».

[11] See *fever* (*OED*), *fefer* (*DOE*); fēver (*MED*). 'Feverish' is rendered by *feferseoc* in two entries in the Cleopatra Glossaries: Cleopatra I F269 «Febricitantem : feferseocne» (Rusche 1996: 291) and Cleopatra II 1023 «Febricitantem : feferseoce» (Rusche 1996: 462).

[12] Cleopatra I includes the entry F422 «Febris a feruore nominatur. id est bryneadl» (Rusche 1996:

of «internal burning» (cf. *byrne*, 2b, *DOE*), while the latter is etymologically related to *hriðian* 'to shake'[13] (thus indicating tremors or convulsions). It is not clear whether *feferadl* (cf. *fefer-ādl*, *DOE*) must be considered a synonym of *fefer* or rather the name for a different form of illness. *Drif* is scarcely attested and the information that can be inferred from its occurrences are minimal. *Sio drif* is the gloss to *febris* in the Rushworth Gospels, Mt. 8.15,[14] where indicates a generic kind of fever; a gloss in Dresden, Landesbibliothek, MS Dc187 has «ad frigoras : wiþ gedrif» (Meritt 1945: 63). A recipe against *gedrif* is preserved in the *Lacnunga* (London, BL, MS Harley 585, fol. 186[r]): «Wið ȝedrif: nim snægl 7 afeorma hine 7 nim þ(æt) clæne fam; mengc wið wifes meolc; syle þicgan; hi(m) bið sel» («For fever: take a snail [*or* slug] and clean it and take the clean foam; mix with woman's milk; give to eat; he will soon be better») (Pettit 2001: I, 116-117). Charms against the same kind of fever are preserved in London, British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.XV[15] and Worcester, Cathedral Library, MS Quarto 5.[16] The latter (beginning *Þis mæg wið gedrif*) is notable for its use of the image of the Seven Sleepers, which is also featured in several Latin and Old English formulas related to fever or lack of sleeping.[17] Among these formulas, the *Lacnunga* charm *Wið dweorh* (literally 'against a dwarf')[18] closely parallels the Worcester charm *Þis mæg wið gedrif*. Both Meaney (1992: 12-33) and Cameron (1993: 151-152) argue that the word *dweorh* was used for a fever accompanied by convulsions or delirium.[19] The correspondence between the two charms suggests, then, that *drif* and *dweorh* could indicate a similar kind of feverish conditions, one associated with insomnia and delirium.[20] This lack of differentiation is not uncommon; Adler – Mara (2016: 2) write that «it is perhaps understandable that ancient physicians and historians had difficulty differentiating between the major "fevers": malaria, typhus and typhoid», also noting that «typhus and typhoid fever were particularly difficult to differentiate, as each could be characterized by a high, prolonged fever, the level of which could not be determined by the ancients, as well as headache, rash, and abdominal pain».

299); the Harley Glossary has F302 «Febris. byrneadl» (Oliphant 1966: 183).

13 Cf. Bonser (1963: 403). See also *hriþ* (*DOE*); *hriþ-ādl* (*DOE*).

14 See Stevenson (1854–1865: I, 81); Tamoto (2013: 23).

15 The charm is discussed by Arthur (2019: 177-210).

16 Edition in Napier (1890: 323-324); see also Storms (1948: 276-277), who writes that the text is printed from a seventeenth-century transcription of MS Harley 464, fol. 177; however, a note preceding the text («Ex codice MS. Bibliotheca Wigern.») shows that the charm was ultimately copied from that in Worcester, Cathedral Library, MS Quarto 5; cf. Pettit (2001: II, 176).

17 Cf. Bonser (1945: 246-256); Pettit (2001: II, 176-180).

18 Edition in Pettit (2001: I, 72-75).

19 See also Bonser (1963: 165-167).

20 Pettit (2001: II, 176) notes that the correspondences among the charms that use the name of the Seven Sleepers «may suggest a widespread and loosely distinctive type of charm for fever (*gedrif*/*dweorg*) in Anglo-Saxon England».

Anglo-Saxons had specific terms for malaria. Cameron (1993: 10) argues that *lencten adl* ('spring fever') is probably a name for an epidemic form of tertian malaria, «one in which the parasite remained dormant during much of the year, becoming active in spring about the same time as the adult forms of the mosquito vector emerged». The *Leechbook* preserves names for tertian fever («þriddan dæges fæfre»), quartan («feorþan dæges fæfre»), as well as quotidian fever («ælces dæges fæfre»).[21] Old English glossaries mostly transmit *lencten adl* as the *interpretamentum* for tertian malaria: *lectinadl* glosses Latin *tertiana* the Épinal-Erfurt Glossary (Pheifer 1974: 52), a gloss paralleled by «Tertiana : lencteladl» in Cleopatra II (Rusche 1996: 449) and «Tertiana : lenctinald» in the Corpus Glossary (Linsday 1921: 174). It must be noted that typhus, malaria and typhoid were frequently confused until the nineteenth century; «indeed, typho-malaria was considered a specific illness well into the 19th century» (Adler – Mara 2016: 1). In his edition of the *Leechbook*, Cockayne consistently translated *lencten adle* as 'typhus', such as in «lencten adle þ(æt) is fefer» (Cockayne 1864-1866: II: 12-13) To make this terminological confusion worse, Storms (1948: 258-261, 270-271) translates *lencten adl* with 'typhoid fever'.

Sir MacArthur (1927: 490) has suggested that the *drif* of the *Peterborough Chronicle* may have been typhus. He also argues that the form of sickness of many medieval epidemics in Britain and Ireland (such as the *pestis flava*) was lice-transmitted relapsing fever, which was led and aggravated by the combination of famine and lack of hygiene (MacArthur 1947: 283-286). However, according to Hirsch (1883: 593), «the history of relapsing fever and of bilious typhoid […] does not permit of being followed back beyond the eighteenth century», although noting that «it is probable that the disease in both its forms had occurred before, and had been confounded with other diseases allied to it in symptoms». Bonser (1963: 404) also observes that «there is no evidence that typhus occurred in England until the later Middle Ages». In his history of typhus, Zinsser (1935: 278) argues that MacArthur «suggests this [typhus] only in view of the circumstances under which the outbreaks occurred, and admits the complete lack of basis for any specific diagnosis in the very vague descriptions», stating that «the "Drif" or "famine fever" of 1087 […] was quite evidently not typhus – possibly dysentery and enteric fever combined with the deficiency diseases incident to famine».[22]

Overall, the textual evidence discussed above is presumably too thin to provide us with a definite diagnosis: the extant transmission can only suggest that that *drif* was a severe fever, probably associated with physical exhaustion, insomnia, delirium, and a

[21] Cf. Cockayne (1864-1866: II, 134-135); *fefer* (*DOE*).

[22] For a reply, see MacArthur (1936: 389-390).

high mortality rate, and that was a form of disease known to the chronicler.

3. Interpretations of the Events of 1086-1087

The twelfth/thirteenth century sources outlined above were more concerned with a moral interpretation of the events of 1086-1087 than their medical accuracy. As Bonser (1963: 53) notes, pestilence «was usually regarded as a visitation – in consequence of popular wickedness – of divine vengeance […]. Consequently the monastic chroniclers deplore famine and pestilence as chastisements rather than as mere misfortunes». The epidemic and famine of 1086-1087 was no different. In the *Peterborough Chronicle*, the combination of inclement weather, cattle pestilence, bad harvests, infectious disease and famine is not seen in a cause-effect relationship; rather, the origin of the great 'misfortunes' is ascribed to the sinful behaviour of the king and his court:

> Ac swylce þing gewurðaþ for folces synna, þet hi nellað lufian God 7 ri[ht]wisnesse. Swa swa hit wæs þa on ðam dagum þet litel rihtwisnesse wæs on þisum lande mid ænige menn, buton mid munecan ane þær þær hi wæll ferdon. Se cyng 7 þa heafodmen lufedon swiðe 7 oferswiðe gitsunge on golde 7 on seolfre, 7 ne rohtan hu synlice hit wære begytan buton hit come to heom. (Clark 1970: 10, ll 15-21)
>
> But such things happen because of the people's sins, in that they will not love God and righteousness. So it was in those days, there was little righteousness in this country in anyone, except with monks alone where they behaved well. The king and the chief men loved gain much and over-much – gold and silver – and did not care how sinfully it was obtained provided it came to them. (Whitelock 1964: 162-163).

This interpretation is adopted in the *Waverley Annals*, where it is stated that «tale infortunium accidit populo pro peccatis eorum, quia nolunt amare Deum et quod rectum est» (Luard 1864-1869: II, 196) («such misfortune affects the people because of the sins of those who do not want to love God and what is righteous»), especially for the «nimium cupiditate auri et argenti» (Luard 1864-1869: II, 196) («excessive greediness for gold and silver») of the king and his court.[23]

The avarice of the Conqueror is a recurring element of his historical portraits (Douglas 1964: 373). William of Malmesbury tells how the Conqueror sought any opportunity to gather money: «sola est de qua merito culpetur pecuniae cupiditas, quam undecumque captatis occasionibus nichil umquam pensi habuit quin corraderet, faceret diceret nonnulla, et pene omnia, tanta maiestate indignora, ubi spes nummi affulsisset» («the only point on which he is rightly criticized is his passion for money, which no scruples restrained him from scraping together by seeking opportunities in all directions,

[23] Translation is my own.

doing and saying much – indeed everything – that was unworthy of so great a monarch, where dawned a glittering hope of gain») (Mynors – Thomson – Winterbottom 1998-1999: I, 508-509). The thirteenth-century chronicler Thomas Wykes states that William I «ab incolis innumerabilem pecuniæ summam extorquens, ipsos intolerabiliter oppressit» (Luard 1864-1869: IV, 11) («more intolerably oppressed the dwellers extorting an incalculable amount of money from them»).[24] However, in the *Peterborough Chronicle* and the *Waverley Annals*, William's (and his court's) love for 'silver and gold' is brought to such an extent that it is believed to have caused divine vengeance. Clark (1970: lxxv-lxxvi) has convincingly suggested that, in the *Peterborough Chronicle* entry for the year 1087, «the dominant tone becomes homiletic», arguing that «the theme is familiar from such pieces as Wulfstan's *Sermo ad Anglos*».[25] The same religious interpretation of events informs the description of the king's sickness, which is seen as a direct consequence of his raids in France; for example, in the *Peterborough Chronicle*: «reowlic þing he dyde, 7 reowlicor him gelamp. Hu reowlicor? Him geyfealde 7 þet him stranglice eglade» (Clark 1970: 11, ll. 39-45) («a miserable thing he did, and more miserable was his fate. How more miserable? He fell ill, and he was severely afflicted by it»; Whitelock 1964: 163). The commentary given by the English annalist was adopted and adapted by the Latin chroniclers who used the *Peterborough Chronicle* as a source: thus, Henry of Huntingdon similarly sees the avarice of the king's court as the cause of the misfortunes afflicting the country, and the ruthless behaviour of the Conqueror as the reason for his downfall:

> Iuerat autem hoc anno rex Willelmus in Franciam, predauitque regnum regis Philippi, et multos suorum neci dedit. Combussit quoque castrum nobile, quod uocatur Maante, et omnes ecclesias que ibi inerrant, plebemque multam et duos anachoritas sanctos igni tradidit. Quibus de causis Deus irritatus, regem cum inde rediret infirmitati, postea morti concessit.
>
> In this year King William had gone to France, and had plundered the kingdom of King Philip and put many of his men to death. He also burnt a fine stronghold called Mantes, and all the churches in it, and he delivered many of the common people and two holy hermits to the fire. God was angered because of all this, and when the king returned from there He submitted him to sickness and later to death. (Greenway 1996: 404-405)

In a recent study, Plumtree (2011-2012: 1-30) has already shown how theological biases affected the historical reports of the death of kings, reports which often carried a pedagogical intent and served a didactic purpose. In the *historiae* of the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries, outlines of William's acts and personality often follow the account of the king's death: this is the case of the excerpt from William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum* quoted above. An early *encomium* of the Conqueror is preserved in *De obitu*

[24] Translation is my own.
[25] See also Jurasinski (2004: 131).

Willelmi, which is included in one of the redactions of *Historia Normannorum Ducum*.[26] The text of *De obitu Willelmi* is built upon extracts from the *Vita Hluudouici* and the *Vita Karoli Magni*;[27] its influence on later accounts of the king's death is scarce, if it existed at all (Lack 2008: 1424). Perhaps the most impressive eulogy for William I is preserved in Orderic Vitalis' *Historia ecclesiastica*, which features a – presumably fictional – account of the king's deathbed speech, along with the description of his burial.[28] Bates (2016: 484) calls «Orderic's account of William's death and funeral […] a magisterial set-piece, a commentary on the transitory nature of worldly power».[29] Both *De obitu Willelmi* and Orderic transmit William I's epitaph. Two verses, of particular interest, set the king's death in a didactic context, stressing the difference between his greatness as a sovereign and his mortal nature: «Rex magnus parua iacet hac tumulatus in urna | Sufficit et magno parua dominus domino» («A great king lies buried in this little urn | A small house serves a mighty lord») (Van Houts 1992-1995: II, 190-191).[30]

Didactic re-tellings of the account William I's death are also found in the historical works discussed in this essay. The entry in the *Peterborough Chronicle* offers a meditation on the transiency of earthly things: «Eala, hu leas 7 hu unwrest is þysses middaneardes wela! Se þe wæs ærur rice cyng 7 maniges landes hlaford, he næfde þa ealles landes buton seofon fotmæl; 7 se þe wæs hwilon gescrid mid golde 7 mid gimmum, he læg þa oferwrogen mid moldan» (Clark 1970: 11, ll. 50-54) («Alas, how deceitful and untrustworthy is this world's prosperity. He who had been a powerful king and lord of many a land, had then of all the land only a seven-foot measure; and he who was once clad in gold and gems, lay then covered with earth»; Whitelock 1964: 163). This passage is followed by the *Chronicle* poem *The Rime of King William*, which further emphasises the moral tone of the entry and emphasises the theme of avarice. Bredehoft (2001: 115) notes that «this poem does not simply praise William, but actively presents negative facts of his character», while Clarke (2012: 45) talks of «inversion or failure» of the model of the *encomium*, or «anti-panegyric – even as a parody of the encomium to a dead ruler» (Clarke 2012: 65). For present purposes it is worth quoting the opening section of the poem, vv. 1-11:

> Castelas he let wyrcean,

[26] Edition in Van Houts (1992-1995: II, 184-191).

[27] See Engels (1973: 209-255); Lack (2008: 1417-1456).

[28] See Chibnall (1968-1980: IV, 78-109).

[29] See also Plumtree (2011-2012*:* 9-10).

[30] The text in Orderic's *Historia* reads: «Rex magnus parua iacet hac Guillelmus in urna | Sufficit et magno parua dominus domino», «William, great king, lies in this little urn | So small a house serves for a mighty lord», ed. Chibnall (1968-1980: IV, 110-111). For an overview of the differences between the two versions, see Lack (2008: 1421).

7 earme men swiðe swencean.
Se cyng wæs swa swiðe stearc,
7 benam of his underþeoddan manig marc
goldes 7 ma hundred punda seolfres.
Ðet he nam be wihte
7 mid mycelan unrihte
of his landleode,
for litterle neode.
He wæs on gitsunge befeallan,
7 grædinæsse he lufode mid ealle.

He had castles built, and poor men terribly oppressed. The king was very severe and he took many marks of gold and hundred pounds of silver from his underlings. All this he took from the people, and with great injustice from his subjects, out of trivial desire. He had fallen into avarice and he loved greediness above everything else. (Lerer 1999: 15)

According to our poet, William's avarice had no other justification than his love for money. There was «litterle neode» to gather silver and gold from his subjects, as shown by the use of two synonyms for 'avarice': the Boethian key-word *gitsung*, v. 10 (Lerer 1999: 16), and *grædignes*, v. 11. Lerer (2007: 42) reads the poem as a poetic response to Norman rule. Since its opening word (*castelas*) and the rhyme scheme, the *Rime* seems «a narrative of foreign imposition told through the imported word and meter».[31] As Lerer (2007: 43) suggests, «castles were foreign to the Anglo-Saxons […]. The word itself, a loan from Norman French, makes clear the immediate impress of Norman life on English soil».[32] This aspect is made explicit in the second section of the poem, which deals with the establishment of the 'New Forest' (another key concern of the poet-annalist and of the twelfth-century English chroniclers; see Marvin 2006: 20, 50-54). William is accused of loving wild beasts «swilce he wære heora fæder» («as if he were his father», v. 19; Lerer 1999: 16) in sharp contrast with his recklessness towards his underlings and their needs. The prose section following the *Rime* clearly represents the life and acts of the Conqueror as an *exemplum*: «Ðas þing we habbað be him gewritene, ægðer ge gode ge yfele, þet þa godan men niman æfter þeora godnesse 7 for[f]leon mid ealle yfelnesse 7 gan on ðone weg þe us lett to heofonan rice» (Clark 1970: 14, ll. 143-145) («These things we have written about him, both good and bad, that good men may imitate the good points, and entirely avoid the bad, and travel on the road that leads us to the kingdom of heaven»; Whitelock 1964: 165). Clarke (2012: 67) argues that «the text also carries direct implications for the reader's own moral and spiritual condition too».

With his account inspired by the *Peterborough Chronicle*, Henry of Huntington provides his readers with an analogous choice between good and evil (Greenway 1996:

[31] On the metre of the *Rime*, see Bredehoft (2005: 93-95).
[32] For a discussion on the poem, see also Whiting (1949: 89-96); Trilling (2009: 230-249).

404-407). In Henry's portrait of the dead king, «uirtutes et uicia» are skilfully juxtaposed; however, greediness once again plays a key role and casts a shadow on William's achievements as a ruler who «created complete peace» (Greenway 1996: 407) by means of his conquests:

> Willelmus omnibus Normannie consulibus fortior fuit. Omnibus Anglorum regibus potentior fuit. Omnibus predecessoribus suis laude dignior fuit. Erat autem sapiens sed astutus, locuples sed cupidus, gloriosus sed fame deditus. […] Auferebat etiam potentissimis auri et argenti milia.
>
> William was stronger than any of the counts of Normandy. He was more powerful than any of the kings of the English. He was more worthy of praise than any of his predecessors. He was wise but cunning, wealthy but avaricious, glorious but hungry for fame. […] He took away, even from the most powerful, thousands in gold and silver. (Greenway 1996: 404-405)

A complaint about the 'New Forest', drawn from the corresponding passage in the *Rime* (Jurasinski 2004: 134) is then followed by another condemnation of the avarice of the king, who «stole their belongings away from his men, not for any need, but from his excessive greed» (Greenway 1996: 405). A condensed version of these portraits is featured in the *Annals of Worcester*, where William is remembered as «vir gloriosus sed cupidus; et in tantum feras amabat, tanquam pater esset ferarum» (Luard 1864-869: IV, 373), «glorious man, but covetous; and he loved wild animals to such an extent that he was like a father to them».[33] The widespread image of the covetousness of King William must, therefore, be adequately taken into account in order to understand some of the historical reports of the epidemic and famine of 1086-1087 – events that, in the *Peterborough Chronicle*, Henry of Huntingdon's *Historia* and the *Waverley Annals* are shaped by a didactic purpose and interpreted as a punishment sent by God to chastise the greedy Norman ruler.

4. Conclusions

The present discussion allows us to draw some conclusions from the events of 1086-1087 as they were recorded in twelfth- and thirteenth-century sources. First, it must be observed that the accounts of the epidemic and famine differ in certain details, although the sources are textually related. The *Peterborough Chronicle* offers several information on the sequence of events (murrain of cattle, inclemency of weather and failure of crops, epidemic fever, and famine), while the later, Latin chronicles mostly omit the bad harvests. Symeon of Durham, who drew his annals from John of Worcester, only records the inclement weather and the murrain of cattle. Although the information provided by our sources is minimal, the textual evidence offered by the *Peterborough*

[33] Translation is my own.

Chronicle and a comparison with other Anglo-Saxon medical charms and recipes suggests that the epidemic of 1087 was that of an infectious disease associated with high fever, delirium, physical exhaustion, and possibly also a high mortality rate. Finally, it must be observed that historical reports of the epidemic were far from neutral, let alone based on cause-effect relationships. Rather than considering bad harvests to be the ultimate origin of the famine, the *Peterborough Chronicle*, Henry of Huntingdon and the compiler of the *Waverley Annals* all interpreted the events afflicting the country to be a direct reflection of the greediness of the Norman court, and to thereby provide their readers with a moral *exemplum*: therefore, the death of the 'most powerful of the kings of English' and the cycle of epidemic and famine of 1086-1087 were set by these medieval historians in the framework of a divine vengeance.[34]

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[34] An earlier draft of this paper was delivered at *Hype, Transmission, and Truth*, Bristol Centre for Medieval Studies, 24th Annual Postgraduate Conference, Bristol (UK), February 2018. I am most thankful to Patrizia Lendinara (Università degli Studi di Palermo) for commenting on earlier drafts of this paper and suggesting improvements.

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