

# **”Egyptian Plagues and the Destruction of Jerusalem”**

## Famine, Epidemics and the Legitimizing of Power in Early Modern Sweden

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In July 1596 Sweden came into a period of continuous rainfall. Creeks overflowed, land became waterlogged and harvests were ruined. By early spring famine was tightening its grip on the land. According to an account belonging to the Örslösa church book in the province of Västergötland people were turning to emergency food – mash, bark, thistles, white moss etc. The account tells of sicknesses which resulted from such “food,” of bodies swelling up and of death visiting house after house in the parishes. In the wake of famine followed a dysentery epidemic. “It was as if a part of the Egyptian plagues and the destruction of Jerusalem had come upon the land and its people,” the account concludes, “and all of this because of sin and lack of repentance.”(1)

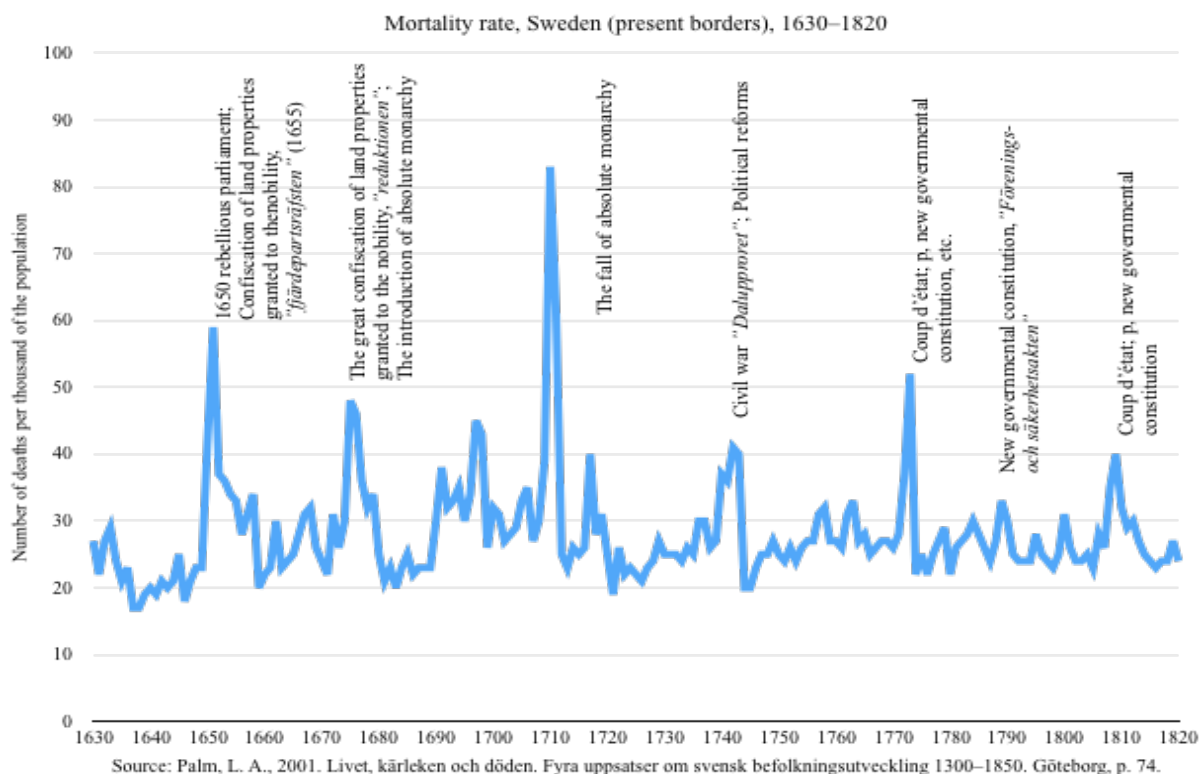
Just as foreign for today’s natural scientific world view, and just as apparent, was the connection between religion and sin on the one hand, famine and epidemics on the other, for the thinking of the time.

But for what sin had God punished the land? Yes, how should the crisis be interpreted? For those who held power this was a delicate question. Soon Duke Karl had a decree read in the churches of the land which went to attack against “traitors” and “secret papists” who spread the notion that God had punished the land because its people had abandoned the superstition of Catholicism and the cult of saints, while the real cause, which lay behind the punishment from God, according to the duke, were the people’s cursing and swearing and that the Sabbath day was profaned.(2) It is possible that the thought behind all of this was to prevent the plagues of Egypt from leading to the destruction of Jerusalem.

## Purpose and Goal

The intention of this project as so sketched out is to study the political implications of the mortality crises of early modern Sweden, from the time when we first have reliable tithing information, about 1590, to the time immediately after the last of the classic mortality crises when the number of deaths exceeded the number of births, about 1820. We argue that the occurrences of famine and epidemics were potentially very dangerous for those who held power since they threatened that power's legitimacy. At the same time these crises could in certain cases open up situations where the powers could actually strengthen their positions. An important point of departure for this project is the strong but previously unnoticed chronological connection between mortality crises and political upheavals in early modern Sweden.(3)

The sustenance situation's significance for politics and the struggle to uphold power's legitimacy have up to now been difficult to study due to the lack of quantitative figures for mortality and harvests in early modern times.(4) Comparisons of this nature have therefore been made between "hunger riots" and political upheavals in connection with the first world war.(5) That hunger crises have occurred even earlier in Swedish history in connection with political transformations have been noted in certain cases, sometimes with reference to corresponding occurrences in other countries, for example the bread tumults' significance for the great revolution in France.(6) Thanks to new research which has produced long sequences of statistics for harvests and mortality in Sweden during the 1600's and 1700's, though, the relationship between crisis and politics can now be studied



in a more systematic way than what was earlier possible.(7) In the diagram below is shown the death rate in Sweden (according to current borders) between the years 1630 and 1820 together with the period's greater political upheavals marked out.

It is evident from the diagram that almost all of the major mortality crises between 1630 and 1820 have a chronological relationship with widespread political reforms or upheavals. The crisis of 1650-1654 (with a mortality which reached 59‰) was joined by a growing peasant opposition which entailed in part the demand for the retraction of donated noble estates to the crown. This was carried out the following parliament in the year 1655 ("fjärdepartsräfssten"), one year after the startling abdication of Queen Christina. Also the much larger retraction of 1680 and the introduction of autocracy occurred after a number of years of poor harvests and epidemics, the worst year being 1675 (48‰). The fall of autocracy and the beginning of the Age of liberty was preceded by the crises of 1710 (83‰) and 1717 (40‰). The Dalecarlian Rebellion of 1743, which was struck down but followed by "peasant-friendly" reforms at the parliament of 1744, took place in connection with a severe mortality crisis in the years 1740-1743 (41‰). The crisis of 1771-1773 (52‰) coincided with Gustav III's coup d'état, a new form of government and a series of following reforms. Also, the crises of 1788-1789 (33‰) and 1808-1809 (40‰) have chronological connections with coups and new constitutional laws. The comparison can be extended both forward and backward in time. The Bread Riots of 1917 have already been commented on. For the time before that, when mortality statistics are lacking, the tithing statistics and qualitative sources point further to the years of severely failed harvests 1595-1596, which were probably followed by one of the greater mortality crises the country has seen, which has in turn a chronological relationship with the Cudgel War, the final military showdown between Karl IX and Sigismund over the throne, and the confirmation of Protestantism.

It should now be clarified that these tumults cannot be seen as a direct consequence of a strained food maintenance situation; each of them, obviously, had several causes. Nevertheless, not a single major, political transformation during this period took place without being preceded by bad harvests and/or epidemics and following mortality crises. Our point of departure is that these hunger crises posed a double problem for those holding power:

Firstly, the crises threatened the power holders' legitimacy as the protectors of the common people. This is a classic theme going back to such researchers as E.P. Thompson. He interpreted the bread tumults of the 1600- and 1700's in Great Britain as an older patriarchal viewpoint being challenged by a rising market society's free pricing of grain. The protests can be linked to the people's idea that those in power had betrayed the ideal that the rulers should protect the people – "*noblesse oblige*".(8)

Secondly – and just as important – the failed harvests and hunger crises had, according to the thinking of the time, a religious meaning. Far into the 1700's failed harvests and epidemics were commonly interpreted as God's punishment for the people's sins. Quite naturally, the question then arose of who it was who had sinned. One interpretation was that the people themselves were deserving of God's wrath, but it was only a step or two to the next thought, one that was dangerous for the rulers, and that was that God had punished the land because of the rulers' bad decisions—could it even be that the wrong regent was in

power?(9) Especially if the ideological structure rested upon the divine appointment of the king, so were punishments from God in the form of poor harvests and epidemics potentially very dangerous for the royal power.

The project takes note of the ideological maneuverability which was available regarding how mortality crises could be interpreted. Thereby, the relationship between various social groups comes into focus. It appears that a ruling party in relationship to the crises could actually strengthen its position through a form of “shock doctrine.” In most of such cases it seems to have been the royal power which could improve its position in relation to the aristocratic Privy Council and the parliament. This is what happened in 1680, 1772 and 1789, and even in connection with the mortality crisis of 1696-1698 (the only significant mortality crisis which cannot be linked to a political crisis) when autocracy was confirmed. When royal power has lost ground instead, so have poor harvests and epidemics been paired with great political defeats and disasters such as the Great Northern War or the loss of Finland.

The project deals with both practical and ideological aspects of how crises were handled. How and to what extent, for example, did the state come to the aid of its subjects through such relief measures as grain deliveries and tax reductions? In spite of the fact that grain provisions could take on enormous proportions (with the crisis of 1696-1698 the state purchased a half-million barrels), we have only fragmentary knowledge of crisis organization.

On the ideological level, the views of the causes of the crises is interesting. During how long a time did the ruling entities continue to believe or argue that the crop failures and epidemics were a punishment from God? How did the rulers handle propaganda in a situation where they themselves had actually begun to interpret the crises from the new horizon of natural scientific understanding? Can we in a corresponding way identify a shift from a patriarchal to a developing market-based view of crisis management?

In addition to this, the project seeks to deal with the people’s world view and actions. What kind of expectations did people actually have in connection with crises? How did one act in one’s relationship to the ruling powers? To what extent did the people hold to the traditional concept of God’s punishment, and why? What did “noblesse oblige” mean in practice? How did all of this change over time and what was the interplay between this and the crises as political crises?

That which is in focus are religious concepts and ideas (“the punishment of God”) and the rulers’ protector-roll (“noblesse oblige”) in connection with famine and epidemics, and how this changed over time. The long-range processes which are central to the project’s theme are secularization, the development of the market economy and “quality of governance,” here the state’s ability to carry on a crisis policy in local society before the modern transportation revolution (railroads and steamboats). It is not the ambition here to treat the above-mentioned political transformations as such—the reduction, the fall of autocracy, Gustav III’s coup etc. Limiting this examination to the state’s practical and ideological handling of crises along with the people’s expectations and conceptions in connection with such gives the result, though, in a greater understanding of the prerequisites and conditions for the transformations.

## Subject Overview

The project follows two lines within early modern research, a demographic/agrarian-historical line dealing with mortality and food maintenance and a political-cultural line dealing with political legitimacy.

I. Research on mortality and food maintenance during this period is broad and comprehensive. To facilitate a survey and show that which is more or less interesting for the project, the research situation can be simply divided into three groups:

a) Research which has sought to date the occurrences of mortality crises and find out their extent

b) Research which has studied the causes of mortality crises

c) Research which has investigated the practical handling of the crises' effects

a) The crises' dates and extent are clearly relevant, but constitute the point of departure rather than the subject of the project. Our project builds upon data from a number of completed projects, including those which we ourselves have worked in, which have made quantitative data on harvests and mortality accessible in electronic form.<sup>(10)</sup> Based on these, the project can identify the mortality crises' intensity and locality, but focus on new, important but previously overlooked connections.

b) The causes of the crises are a much debated subject within the historical, demographic science where two main conceptions can be said to stand against each other. An older tradition, which still dominates within the research community, maintains that it was principally the food maintenance situation that played a role in the mortality crises. The focus is thereby on the harvests and the relationship between harvest results and mortality.<sup>(11)</sup> In opposition to this, researchers have turned instead more in the direction of diseases and their significance, where among other things one considers climate and social relationships—the food maintenance situation winds up therefore more in the background.<sup>(12)</sup> For the current project, this discussion is less relevant. To the degree the causes of the crises are themselves the object of investigation, it deals in that case more with the extent to which the state's acting or failure to act contributed to the escalation of potential crises or not—a theme which takes a central place in discussions surrounding the starvation catastrophes in the Third World during the 1900's (see below). Above all, what is in focus are questions concerning the view of those times toward causes, responsibility and guilt, that is to say how the crises were interpreted by contemporaries, and how this changed over time. Contrary to the question of the actual cause of the mortality crises, this question has been left more or less open by research.

c) The practical aspects of the handling of crises is, from the viewpoint of this project, the central part within the historical-demographical/agrarian line of current research. The state of research, it must be said, is thin. Karl Åmarks *The Grain Trade and Grain Politics in Sweden 1719-1830* is still the most ambitious study in the field, a book which was written a

hundred years ago.(13) Concerning grain storage, the works of Ilkka Teerijoki, such as *The Parish Magazine in Nyland's and Tavastehus Counties during Swedish Rule*, are more full and detailed(14); he has otherwise, though, published mostly in Finnish and the research deals mostly with the eastern half of the kingdom. The magazine system in Sweden (present borders) has otherwise been treated or touched on by Walter Sjölin, Enoch Ingers and Johan Söderberg.(15) Grain import, aside from Åmark's book, has been taken up in works by Lennart Palm and Astrid Hegardt.(16) Besides filling holes in earlier research on the disposition of magazines, grain relief and so forth, the project also aims at taking a broader grasp of crisis-handling's practical aspects. We consider that this consisted of a battery of measures, in which tax reduction, granted postponement or even writing off constituted significant features.

II. Beyond this, the project wishes to examine the extent to which the practical handling of crises also had an ideological side, where the ruling power would fulfill its obligations as the protector of the people, and how this changed over time. With this question, we are over on the other side of the field of research, which deals with political legitimacy in early modern society. Even this is a broad field of research which, in its turn, can be divided up into various subdivisions. Here, we satisfy ourselves with two, which are partially intertwined:

a) Research on political culture, that is, rather set patterns in terms of the relationship between the rulers and the ruled in early modern society.

b) Research on folk culture in early modern society. In the center of interest is the common man's everyday life, especially popular ideas of various aspects of existence, not least the views of the ultimate things. These are problematics which at least indirectly can have implications for the question of political legitimacy.

a) In the Swedish research, a number of aspects of the relationship between the rulers and the ruled have come into view. For example, one has studied the political elite's (war) propaganda and promulgations in seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century Sweden.(17) It is apparent that religious arguments were often used to justify the government's politics and the social order on the whole. In his study of state propaganda during the Great Northern War, Peter Ericsson finds that a central message to the subjects was: "You are a sinner." War and destruction was described as divine punishment for sins.(18) Neither he nor the other researchers, though, are interested specifically in the ruling elite's message in connection with famine and epidemics. An exception, to a certain degree, is Göran Malmstedt, about which more will follow below.

An even more noticeable aspect of the legitimation of power deals with the ruling elite's patriarchally colored claims of protecting—militarily and with maintenance—the subordinate population.(19) The ruling elite's staging or imaging and such has been studied within a constructivistic branch of research—how well did the particular regent or other power-holder play the role or roles which fell on him or her?(20) A study of this type of roleplay is, of course, central to understanding the dynamics of power. But while the research of more recent times has sometimes the tendency to analyze these roles on a purely discursive or symbolic level, we mean that the analysis, if it is to be fruitful, must be set more clearly in relation to the real problems which people faced. The acute occasions

when food maintenance was strained to its limits show themselves then to be strategic. In such a way can the project contribute to knowledge about why, how and against which background the ruling elite's staging took place.

Among the power-holders' conditions belonged even the state's listening to the people's complaints, which was an important part of the patriarchal protector-role. Through suppliants, parliamentary appeals, examining commissions and by other means, the common man could to a certain extent make his voice heard, and sometimes obtain the rulers' aid, often in the form of relief from taxes. Here there is a big discussion with many ramifications about how the relation between peasants and rulers is to be understood, where one can discern roughly a consensus- respectively a class- and conflict-perspective. One of the points of contention has to do with the question of whether the Swedish political culture with its spirit of negotiating and compromise was special or unique compared to other countries.(21) Also the urban environment has received attention in recent years from the standpoint of these or similar viewpoints thanks to Mats Berglund's study of tumults and street disturbances in Stockholm during the 1700's and 1800's.(22) Research on Sweden's political culture is often concentrated on political crises like war and peasant uprisings. That failed harvests and famine have occurred can sometimes be mentioned as a background factor, such as regarding the Dalecarlian Rebellion of 1743, but is never paid more than an absent-minded interest. A systematic study of the mortality crises' political contexts would shed light on an aspect of the conditions and requirements of power-legitimizing that has so far been neglected.

b) Research on folk culture, which broke through in Sweden in the 1980's, has dealt with several different epochs from the Middle Ages to modern times. The French Annales School's mentality-historical perspective has not so seldom been a source of inspiration. A tone-setting cultural historian for the early modern period is the Englishman Peter Burke, whose book on folk culture in Europe was, typically for this time, translated to Swedish in 1983.(23) Another influential historian is Keith Thomas, especially regarding his work on popular concepts of religion and magic in early modern England.(24) The Swedish researchers in this field have often examined questions about the peasant populations' church-going habits and magical-religious world view. Here one has shown interesting differences between the social elite's norms and conceptual worlds on the one hand and those of the masses on the other, often from a disciplinering perspective.(25) That this research has points of contact with our subject is made clear, for example, by Göran Malmstedt's investigation of the reduction of public holidays in Sweden. There, analysis is done of, among other things, how the ruling elite, during the 1600's and 1700's, tried to convince the common people, through the use of prayer-day placards, that the natural catastrophes which had occurred were God's punishment for the people's sins. The author points out that the authorities' explanation of the plagues was not universally prevailing, but that the common man could have his own thoughts about what was behind it all. For example, it seems that many connected the crop failures etc. to the interference in the traditional cult that took place during the Reformation.(26) Such interpretations must have surely threatened the power-holders' legitimacy. How, specifically, the mortality crises were understood and handled, though, is not systematically studied by Malmstedt.(27) Generally missing in the Swedish research are cultural and mentality-historical

examinations of how ordinary people related to phenomena such as severe crop failure, famine, epidemics and similar catastrophes.

Even if the project contributes to new knowledge within different fields of research, its main point is to combine the first element (mortality and food maintenance) with the second (political legitimacy). What is to be studied are the mortality crises precise political implications during the early modern epoch. Within Swedish research this has not been done earlier. Internationally there are certain tendencies in recent years to get a better grip on the connection crisis-politics.(28) With the exception of E.P. Thompson's classical study, which in spite of its merits is hardly a systematic investigation of the question, research on the relationships between the mortality crises and politics is still limited to isolated, individual crises. To study change over such a long period of time as is sketched in this project has few, if any, equivalents within the international research. A plausible explanation for this is that, in most other countries, this would be significantly more difficult to carry out: there is a lack, quite simply, of source material on harvests, sicknesses and mortality, which in such a project as this would offer a clear framework and point of departure for the investigation.

### **Project Description**

By means of databases applying to harvests and mortality, the crises' intensity and locality can be identified and the information can build a body of material for the strategic selection of points in time and regions for studies of the state's practical respectively ideological-political crisis-handling along with the conceptual world of the people. The long time period has been chosen in order to study change over time in a meaningful way. This at the same time necessitates a strategic selection. Databases applying to (the harvest-based) tithe in Sweden 1665-1800 contributes further to identifying the points in time when crop failure prevailed, but without any greater mortality crisis following. The state's acting on these occasions will be, of course, especially interesting to examine.

The state's practical handling is realized with the help of the counties' accounts of grain relief, customs material and (for later times) material on crown warehouses. The ideological and political handling is studied through council minutes, prayer-day placards, correspondence between sheriffs and the county governor and material from examining commissions. The intention in all of this is to study crisis-handling on central, regional and local levels.

The people's conceptual world is studied in strategically chosen local communities which can be identified according to mortality statistics. Here, a broad spectrum of source material is used: the county governor's correspondence, church archives, cathedral chapter archives (for the religious aspects), judgement books and also peasant supplications and parliamentary appeals.

In the analysis it is important to distinguish between crises that took place against the background of wars that were going on and crises that were wholly from times of peace: 1650-1654, 1696-1698 and 1771-1773. Here it will be interesting to study if and how the



popular currents and the ruling elite's participation and propaganda differed and how this changed over time.

Theoretically and thematically the project relates to research from recent times which has dealt with the twentieth century's starvation catastrophes in the Third World. This research has many points of contact with the premises of our project, among other things the idea that the power-holders have a protective role to play. The gap between people's expectations of those in power and their own experience of poverty has been explained by the development economist Amartya Sen in his pioneering work *Poverty and Famines*—which, theoretically in a quite uncomplicated way, for its part, can be linked to E.P. Thompson's idea of a moral economy—as a “frustration of a right” (entitlement failure). Sen pointed out here a central and fundamental problem: starvation was not the result of a shortage of food, but a political failure.(29) Other studies of provisional shortages with this as a premise have followed subsequently.(30)

One difference between this project and the Third World-based research is that the latter has mainly focused on disintegrating units where the governing power does not manage to reach out into the local community. Instead, there appear middlemen and local potentates who actually gain from starvation. This is a fundamental difference in relation to the early-modern Sweden which in comparison was a stable and independent state formation which laid claim to, and to an ever greater extent surely had the capacity to, protect the population. This forms a contrast to the Third World's often weak (and corrupt) state formations, but even to, for example, Germany during the Thirty Years' War, the colonized Ireland during the 1800's and the Soviet Union during the 1900's, where one, albeit disputed, research branch means that starvation was used as an instrument of power.

Another difference is that religious (or ideological) aspects of crises and the handling of crises are often hardly noticed in this research tradition. A central premise of the project is precisely that central power and subjects hardly had a similar interpretation of the crises. Dana Frank's research concerning the bread riots in the United States in 1917 shows that even if privation was widespread in the country, it was only the politically radical areas that protested, which pointed out on ideological grounds the faults in the prevailing capitalism.(31) For early modern times in this context one may refer to James C. Scott who means that the power elite's ideological control over the lower classes is, seen historically, far less than what many theoreticians and researchers have cared to maintain. The social elite's position and privileges, he argues, are always legitimized by referring to their efforts and commitment in contributing to the common welfare.(32) Those governing must insist that they exercise their power on behalf of the governed. This idealized picture of the social order which is thereby painted contains always promises and pledges to the subjects, which in that way are provided with arguments which can be used against the regime's political practices. The need to legitimate power thus puts ideological weapons in the hands of those upon which the power is used.(33) The ruling entities' acting can thereby be judged, and found to be, satisfactory or deficient. The phrase “noblesse oblige,” Scott points out, is not interpreted in the same way by the subjects as it is by the social elite.(34)

Our standpoint is that comparisons with starvation catastrophes and hunger protests in the world primarily during the 1900's can open up new questions and perspectives about mortality crises in early modern Sweden—at the same time, of course, as the opposite

applies to a corresponding extent. The long historical perspective, the ideological and religious probing, the Swedish case as an example of a relatively stable state formation, taken together, suggest that the investigation should be able to contribute with new approaches to the twentieth century's global discussion on starvation and politics. One hypothesis for this examination is that the Swedish state formation's stability is explained, at least partially, in an ability better than many other political bodies of the time to handle both the practical and ideological challenge which failed harvests and deadly crises involved. Of significance here was also the fact that very few of the wars of the 1600's and 1700's were fought on Swedish soil, with all that that entailed in terms of plundering and epidemics.

### **Significance**

The project's greatest significance is the fact that it cuts through four central fields of research which have seldom been combined previously: a mentality-historical tradition of the view of nature and power; a constructivistic direction regarding how the royal power stages itself; a social-historical school, with attention directed toward the country's food maintenance; as well as a political-historical tradition of power over the kingdom. The project's point of departure is Swedish conditions, but the questions are empirical and theoretically interesting in an all-European perspective. Further, the project aims, from the standpoint of the Swedish case, to contributing to a global, current discussion on the connections between politics and starvation in the world.

Thanks to Sweden's exceptionally rich source material on population and production, which for the central parts of the project have now been compiled into easily accessible series, these questions should be able to be illuminated in a better way here than in other European countries. The long time perspective makes it possible to problematize several deeper aspects of social change.

### **Preliminary Results**

The premise itself of the project must be considered as a new discovery within research, namely the chronological relationship between mortality crises and political upheavals throughout the whole early modern epoch. The diagram above suggests that mortality crises were politically explosive, which brings up questions about the people's expectations and the ruling power's legitimation in connection with famine and epidemics.

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