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SAINT ANTHONY'S FIRE: EPIDEMICS IN GRAIN

Summary

Medieval and Early Modern Europe was frequently devastated by epidemics whose cause, due to the ignorance of chemical processes, was impossible to pinpoint. One of the common illnesses was ergotism – an infection caused by rye ergot – known as “Saint Anthony’s Fire” or “holy fire” (ignis sacer). The paper explains the characteristics of ergotism and emphasizes the link to Saint Anthony. A brief overview of circumstances of ergotism cases in Europe in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period is then given. Finally, the paper examines the connection between ergotism and witchcraft accusations. This is done through an analysis of legal documents about witch prosecution in the English county of Essex in the 16th and 17th century, as well as in Salem Village in 1692.

Keywords: *epidemics, ergotism, Saint Anthony’s fire, witch–hunting, Essex, Salem*