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The impacts of spring-summer droughts in England, 1200-1700

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This paper studies the occurrence and impacts of spring-summer droughts in pre-industrial England from 1200 to 1700. The study is based on documentary data, and the types of records and source availability are described, and an overview of droughts in those 500 years is provided. The focus lies on identifying the meteorological, hydrological and agricultural aspects of late medieval and early modern droughts, and on highlighting the structural impacts on the agricultural and pastoral economy, transport, energy supply and health. Due to the specific characteristics of wheat cultivation in medieval and early modern England, the grain production was comparatively resilient to drought. However, livestock farming was under threat, when rainfall levels fell noticeably below average. The most important problem in warm and dry summers was the risk to health. Partly steeply raised mortality levels were associated with these conditions during the study period, because malaria, gastrointestinal disease and plague showed an affinity to heat and drought. Adaptation strategies adopted by the people of pre-industrial England to reduce the stress posed by summer droughts will be discussed.