

Ergot fungus and poisonous rye

Plant diseases as a harvest disaster

Plant diseases such as ergot fungus could render entire harvests unusable for humans and animals. In the 9th century, there was an early epidemic-like spread of the fungus and poisoning in the Xanten area.

All types of grain could be affected. Rye was particularly susceptible to the highly toxic fungus, which appeared as dark 'ergot bodies' on the ears of grain. If this was not detected, consumption of flour containing ergot led to severe poisoning. Those affected suffered from intense cramps and vascular damage, which could lead to the loss of limbs and even death. Due to the dedicated treatment provided by the Order of St. Anthony, the disease was also called 'Saint Anthony's fire.' It continued to occur epidemically until the 18th century.