How did we survive (or not) the last climate crisis? Tracing the impacts of environmental crises in Little Ice Age Norway (1600-1850)

Supervisors Ingar Stene / Dominik Collet – NORCLI / CLIM-Shock projects

Who suffered—and from what—when Norway faced famine, epidemics, and war during previous climate anomalies and volcanic shocks? How did communities respond in the thick of it? This integrated project invites students to work with local sources from the period of the Little Ice Age from the 17th to early 19th centuries, They will join the current research teams NORCLI and CLIM-Shock and use either parish records or judicial documents to trace how climate crises show up in everyday life.

Project 1: Who Died in Times of Climate Crisis? Age, Sex, and Causes of Death in Norwegian Parish Records (1623–1815)

Who suffered—and from what—when Norway faced famine, epidemics, and war in the past? This hands-on history project invites students to explore questions of age, sex, social status, and causes of death during periods of crisis, using entries from Norwegian parish records ("kirkebøker") between 1623 and 1815. While parish records have been used by genealogists and historians for decades, few have linked them clearly to climate and environmental contexts.

Work is flexible and practical, involving a mix of online research and digital tools with optional visits to local archives. It will take place over the summer break. The NORCLI project has assembled a working database that students can build on by reading, coding, and analysing records for selected parishes and years. They might focus on known crisis windows like the 1690s, 1740s, 1770s, or 1809–1812, or follow leads they discover in the sources. As part of the project, students will practice interpreting historical handwriting and terminology, try out ways to clean and harmonize messy data, and experiment with simple analyses to see how mortality patterns shift in crisis years versus calmer periods. Where causes of death are noted, they might trace patterns related to disease, nutrition, and social vulnerability—and connect findings to climate anomalies, failed harvests, trade disruptions, or wartime stress. They are also encouraged to work on the spatial dimensions of their findings, using simple mapping tools to explore regional differences.

By the end, students will produce a small, well-documented dataset, plus a short, accessible report or poster summarizing what they found—who was most at risk, how crises unfolded, and what the parish records can (and cannot) tell us. Training is informal and tailored to the students' skills. Proficiency in Norwegian and History helps but can be worked around. The project is ideal for final-year bachelor or master students curious about the intersection of climate, environment, and social history—and keen to work with real historical sources.

Project 2: "Climate" in Court: Crisis and Community in Norwegian Judicial Records (c. 1590's–1800)

How did local communities handle pressure when scarcity, disease, or war hit? This project asks students to explore qualitative evidence of social stress during times of crisis, using

Norwegian judicial records (“tingbøker”) from the early 1600s to the late 18th, century with a focus on close reading and interpretation of specific court cases.

Typical conflicts could include theft and market violations during lean years, disputes over access to pasture, timber, or fisheries, conflicts around labor and provisioning, public health and quarantine measures, or wartime regulations and desertion. The goal is to trace how hardship shows up in the records: what kinds of conflicts emerge, who is involved, and how the courts respond—while noting when climate or environmental factors are explicitly mentioned or silently hidden in the background.

The work is practical and interpretive,involving a mix of online research and digital tools with optional visits to local archives. It will take place over the summer break. Students will get to practice reading historical language and legal terminology, apply source criticism, and develop concise case write-ups and thematic notes. Simple qualitative coding (keywords, actors, places) can help organize findings and connect them to secondary literature on climate anomalies, harvest failures, trade disruptions, or military events. To keep the scope manageable, students are asked to work on existing transcriptions, available either in published books, as part of UiO Tingbokprosjektet, or in material made available via the National Archives’ Digitalarkivet (digitalarkivet.no). Students might choose periods of known climatic crises —like the 1690s, 1740s, 1770s, or 1809–1812—or follow leads they find in the texts.

By the end, students produce a compact portfolio: a curated set of case summaries with brief commentary, and a short, accessible report or poster highlighting what the courts reveal about crisis, environment, and social order. Training is informal and tailored to the students’ skills. Norwegian reading skills are necessary. Training in history will help but is not essential. The project is recommended for master students but might be suitable for some final-year bachelor students with the right qualifications.