It appeared to be a contemporary account of a historical food crisis – yet the Laichingen hunger chronicle proved to be a fabrication. Initially, Hans Medick himself, a former researcher at the Max Planck Institute for History, was also deceived, but he later helped reveal the truth. Historians do not research villages, they research in villages – this observation by Italian Giovanni Levi exemplifies the work of micro-historians. Hans Medick knew this, and further refined this microscopic approach in the sequence of history. Beginning in the late 1980s, he was using it to research the history of the village of Laichingen in Baden Württemberg – back then, he worked at the Max Planck Institute for History in Göttingen. The results of his work on the linen-weaving village in the Swabian Alb were published in 1996 under the title “Weben und Überleben in Laichingen 1650–1900. Lokale Geschichte als Allgemeine Geschichte” (Weaving and Survival in Laichingen 1650–1900. Local History as General History).

The postscript of this very detailed work concerning the “Laichingen hunger chronicle” is particularly significant. Medick saw this chronicle as “an example of a fiction of the facts” and the problem of verification in the representation of history. The famine chronicle appeared in full for the first time in 1817 in the Baden Württemberg yearbook of statistics and regional studies. The teacher Christian August Schnerring, born in Laichingen in 1870, published it in 1917 as a supplement to a longer scientific paper on the years of inflation and starvation from 1817/18 in Baden Württemberg. Schnerring claimed to have discovered the “handwritten account of a resident of the Swabian Alb” in his folkloric research. The publication’s foreword read: “The person who left the following record lived and wrote in Laichingen in the Swabian Alb. On forty now-yellowed pages, he described the days of hunger. The directness of his depiction impressed the historian. All of the information he provides stands up to historical scrutiny. It is regrettable that the first page – or perhaps even the first few pages – of the manuscript have been ripped out.” Schnerring made several references to this source in a historical novel that he published a year later.

However, an original manuscript of the chronicle could not be found. Yet its coherence and authenticity raised it above all doubt – starting with the unusual weather conditions in the first half of 1816, which the chronicle interpreted as a harbinger of the coming catastrophe, to the crises brought about by bad weather in the summer and fall of the same year, which resulted in the loss of the harvest. The unusual weather and the activities of unscrupulous traders were portrayed as the cause of the famine.

Rich and poor suffered in equal measure under the adversity. Only the intervention of the government in the form of supplies of grain and provisions, as well as price and market controls, ultimately saved the village. “The King and the Queen,” said the chronicle at the beginning of March 1817, “have punished the ‘Kornjuden’ [grain Jews] and have thus done the entire population so much good that they will never be able to thank them enough.”

According to the chronicle, non-local Jewish traders from the surrounding villages of Buttenhausen and Jebenhausen were responsible for speculating purchasing and profiteering, making the crisis worse. Günter Randecker found this perplexing. The economist, who was involved in a local historical workshop project, was the first, in the summer of 1887, to express the suspicion that the chronicle had been fabricated.

Medick who himself referred to the chronicle of the Laichingen famine as a source in a novel to the history of famine and food supply (1985), provides a self-critical and exemplary analysis of his own experience as a historian in the postscript. He calls for historians to take a more critical approach than usual to their own research methods, including, in particular, considering the standards historians use in attributing validity to their sources. He also said he had learned how important it was to deal constructively with his own mistakes: analyzing delusion and deceit, and learning from this, is often neglected in science. Michael Buess

Medick got to know the place and its people well, such as this daughter Ada Moritz, shown here.