Journée d'études 'Nature bankrupt is'. Ecology, Economy and Urbanism in Tudor England

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RÉSUMÉ

The Tudor era (1485-1603) was a period of profound societal transformation during which a series of interrelated economic, urban, and environmental issues came to the fore. During Henry VIII’s reign, the construction of warships destroyed huge tracts of English woodland, leading to a shortage of timber. At the same time, due to overhunting, game was gradually disappearing from the English forests and conservatory measures, such as the « Act against Unlawful Hunting the Hare » (1512), were taken. In the 1530s, the Commission of Sewers became responsible for the inspection of London drains and embankments in order to prevent flooding. During the reign of Elizabeth I, the wealthy would frequently flee London for the countryside because of noxious smoke and sporadic plague outbreaks. The vast majority of Londoners though had to live with the growing pollution caused by nascent industry and burgeoning
economic development. Water pollution, in particular, became a major source of anxiety, and those who had been dumping animal carcasses in the rivers were now liable to large fines (‘Proclamation Enforcing the Statute against Water Pollution’, 1590). These tendencies may then attest to the importance of the emerging economic, environmental and urbanistic issues of the time: while some of Shakespeare’s contemporaries chose to ignore them, many expressed deep concern and interest. However, though proto-environmental measures were indeed taken to improve the quality of urban life and protect the natural world, they stemmed for the major part from pragmatic and economic interest. From this perspective, can we speak of the birth of an ‘ecological’ conscience in Tudor England? How were the urban, environmental, and economic challenges of the sixteenth century addressed and negotiated? Were they, on the contrary, simply dismissed by the governments that contributed to fashioning early modern English society? How does the literature (in the broad sense of the word) and the drama of the period convey these concerns and to what extent did they raise awareness of these problems among readers and audiences alike?

This workshop will consider all these questions and related topics, and while interdisciplinary approaches are particularly welcome, more specific analyses focusing on a particular moment of the Tudor period (with the history of climate as a background, for instance) are also pertinent. Though economy, urbanism and ecology are modern-day terms, participants are expected to engage with these concepts with a view to showing how close reading of literary texts, of Tudor legislation, and/or the in-depth study of Elizabethan epistemologies, to cite but a few examples, may prove useful in better understanding the societal challenges of the period and delineating these putative precursors of the environmental cause.

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