

Heli Huhtamaa

THE ACADEMY'S PRIZE for the Humanities was awarded in 2019 to Heli Huhtamaa. Postdoctoral researcher Huhtamaa gained a doctorate in Climate Sciences from the University of Bern in 2017 and in History from the University of Eastern Finland in the same year, both with the same thesis dealing with climate variability and hunger years: *Exploring the Climate-Society Nexus with Tree-Ring Evidence: Climate, Crop Yields and Hunger in Medieval and Early Modern North-East Europe*. One of the outstanding merits of this work and her subsequent research has been her comprehensive multidisciplinary approach.

Huhtamaa's work has cast new light on both environmental history and climate sciences. With her international orientation, she has been able to adopt a bold, innovative methodological approaches which combines the traditional documentary-based methods of historical research with the long-term analysis, spatiality and physical methods used in natural sciences.

"I began my studies in history in Joensuu in 2004, and as they progressed I became more and more interested in the natural sciences and particularly in the interface between these and the humanities. This led me to do my internship at the University of Joensuu's Laboratory of Dendrochronology, during which I developed an interest in the climatic information contained in tree rings. It then struck me that I could make use of tree-ring data in the context of historical research, since the severe famine years of 1601, 1695 and 1867, for instance, were clearly identifiable in the tree rings."

"A further opportunity to develop my skills in climate sciences opened when I spent the academic year 2013–2014 on a research fellowship at the University of Bern. There I was working in one of the globally leading groups in the field of climate history. At the end of that fruitful year it was decided that I should write my doctoral thesis for the universities of Bern and Eastern Finland under a cotutelle joint

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supervision arrangement, so that in the end the majority of my doctoral studies took place in Switzerland.”

These new approaches, in turn, led her to work at internationally renowned research groups in the universities of Bern, Utrecht and Heidelberg. In 2018–2019 she had a post-doctoral project of her own in Heidelberg, from which she is returning to Bern in 2020 to join back the climatic history research group.

Huhtamaa has a broad range of scientific publications to her name, including papers in international journals of history, palaeosciences, environmental sciences, archaeology, geography and meteorology.

“Before I started working for a doctorate, I imagined that the humanities and the natural sciences were as different as day and night, but I have realised now that is not the case. Academic disciplines have many more interfaces in common than they have boundaries that separate them.”

“The examination of the so-called wicked problems, such as the effects of climate

on human wealth and well-being, calls for a substantial range and depth of expertise in various branches of the human and natural sciences. I hope that cross-disciplinary research involving specialists in the humanities and the natural sciences will increase in the future.”

One example of Huhtamaa’s capacity for methodological innovation is a paper of hers in the journal *The Holocene* in which she provides annual data on grain yields in Finland going back to the year 760, valuable findings of relevance to the country’s prehistory and medieval history. For the purposes of that paper Huhtamaa and her co-author Samuli Helama used tree-ring density measurements for the first time to estimate variations in harvest yields, a method that has later been employed in other studies.

“Climate change sceptics are increasingly making use of populist interpretations of history in their argumentation, and for this reason it is extremely important that historians should produce criti-

cal research on the relations between climate and human activities in the past. Consequently, there is a demand for the

professional skills of historians in the vast field of climatic change research, policy making and discussion.”

The Prize for the Humanities is awarded to a scholar of humanistic sciences in the beginning of their career who has already earned international renown.