



## Summary :

A great famine afflicted Edessa between 499/500 and 502, the result of a combination of multiple destructive factors. The number of victims was great, since the impact of the crisis was felt not only in the city of Edessa but also in the wider area.

## Date

499/500, March - 502, May

## Geographical Location

Edessa, the area from the coasts of the Mediterranean up to Western Armenia

### 1. Brief presentation of the crisis

The biennial famine that afflicted [Edessa](#) between the years 499/500 and 502 was the result of various destructive factors: the raid of a huge swarm of locusts at first, then the continuous climatic anomalies and, finally, the outbreak of an epidemic disease. The number of victims was great, since the impact of the crisis was felt not only in the city of Edessa but to the whole surrounding area.

### 2. The famine: onset - aggravation - recovery

Everything started in March of 499/500 when an unusually large number of locusts incubated, started infecting the area stretching from the coasts of the Mediterranean until Western [Armenia](#). The fact immediately resulted to the ruination of the crop of grain, which consequently caused an apeak increase in the prices. The menace of the famine forced the financially weaker into selling their possessions and into beggary.

Gradually a lot of people abandoned these regions, whereas all those, who due to age lacked the strength required, migrated massively to the cities, mainly Edessa. The abrupt increase of the population combined with the ongoing famine aggravated the miserable standard of living in the city. People bedevilled by the famine, resourced to the consumption of inedible food, which hastened massive fatality.

Meanwhile, the unfavorable climatic conditions caused a further disintegration of the situation. The cold and the frost during winter caused the death of a great number of homeless refugees, whereas the hot wind and the drought, that prevailed during the period of harvest, resulted into its destruction, prolonging the lack of food and intensifying the famine. The prices of grain rose to about 650%; meanwhile an [epidemic](#) broke out in the area, which also contributed to the increase of mortality. Although we do not know the disease that afflicted the area, it is possible that it was an epidemic of the same kind of small-pox which had broken out a few years earlier and had infested a great part of the population.

In May 502, more than two years after the eruption of the crisis, the famine reached its end thanks to a good harvest.

### 3. Victims - confrontation

The exact number of the victims was not documented, the basic, however, source for these events, Joshua the Stylite, informs us that in the period between November of 500 and March of 501 approximately 17,000 people lost their lives.<sup>1</sup> The inhabitants of Edessa, under the supervision of the [metropolitan](#) Nonnus, assumed the responsibility for the care of the diseased and the burial of the numerous dead. Improvised clinics and dormitories for the homeless were erected in the streets and the city baths, whereas older tombs were opened in order to house the unprecedented number of corpses.

On the behalf of the imperial government the measures against the crisis were not drastic. During the first phase of the crisis, during the spring of 499/500, the emperor [Anastasios I](#) (491-518) offered nothing but an incosiderable amount of money in order to assist



the suffering people of Edessa. A few months later, when the situation was already out of control, Anastasios appeared more generous and offered a large amount of money to the city, which was used by the governor of the [province of Osrhoene](#) into suppling the starving people with bread. Nevertheless this measure did not work since during the same period an abrupt rise of mortality was documented. The measure taken by the emperor shortly before the end of the crisis is also noteworthy: within a decree he banned the celebration of the pagan ceremonies in honour of Adonis, connoting that the worship of the ancient deity had angered the God of the Christians, and resulted into the appearance of the scourge.

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1. Information considering this crisis derives exclusively from the Chronicle of (Pseudo-) Joshua the Stylite, a text contemporary to the events, written in Syriac. For this reason we use it here in its most recent English edition of the text: *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite*, translation - introduction - comments Trombley, F. R. – Watt, J. W., (Translated Texts for Historians 32, Liverpool 2000), pp. 32-48.

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#### Bibliography :

	<b>Stathakopoulos D.</b> , <i>Loimos kai Limos. A Systematic Survey and Typology of Epidemics and Famines in the Late Roman and Early Byzantine World (284-750 AD)</i> , Wien 2000
	<b>Luther A.</b> , <i>Die syrische Chronik des Josua Stylites</i> , Berlin, New York 1997
	<b>Ψευδο-Ιησοῦς Στυλίτης</b> , <i>The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite, translated with notes and introduction</i> , Trombley, F. – Watt, J.C. (eds), Liverpool 2000
	<b>Leclainche H.</b> , "Crises économiques à Édesse (494-506) d'après la chronique du pseudo Josué le Stylite", <i>Pallas</i> , 27, 1980, 89-100

#### Webliography :

	Joshua the Stylite, Chronicle composed in Syriac in AD 507 <a href="http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/joshua_the_stylite_02_trans.htm">http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/joshua_the_stylite_02_trans.htm</a>
	Review of the Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite <a href="http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol4No2/HV4N2PRVanGinkel.html">http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol4No2/HV4N2PRVanGinkel.html</a>

#### Sources

*The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite*, translation - introduction - comments Trombley, F. R. - Watt, J. W. (Translated Texts for Historians 32, Liverpool 2000), pp. 32-48 [cf. the former translation by W. Wright (Cambridge 1882), p. 27-34].

#### Quotations

The Famine of 499-502 in Edessa according to the Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite

Ch. 38 [The year 811 (AD 499-500)]. In the month of Adar [March] of this year the locusts came upon us out of the ground, so that, because of their number, we imagined that not only had the eggs that were in the ground been hatched to our harm, but that the very air was vomiting them against us, and that they were descending from the sky upon us. When they were only able to crawl, they devoured and consumed all the Arab territory and all that of Rasain and Tella and Edessa. But after they were able to fly, the stretch of their radii was from the border of Assyria to the Western sea [the Mediterranean] and they went northwards as far as the



boundary of the Ortaye. They ate up and desolated these districts and utterly consumed everything that was in them... Presently, in the month of Nisan [April], there began to be a dreath of grain and of everything else, and four modii of wheat were sold for a dinar. In the months of Khaziran [June] and Tammuz [July] the inhabitants of these districts were reduced to all sorts of shifts to live. They sowed millet for their own use, but it was not enough for them, because it did not thrive. Before the year came to an end, misery from hunger had reduced the people to beggary, so that they sold their property for half its worth, horses ant oxen and sheep and pigs. And because the locusts had devoured all the crop, and left neither pasture nor food for man or beast, many forsook their native places and removed to other districts of the north and west. And the sick who were in the villages, as well as the old men and children and women and infants, and those who were tortured by hunger, being unable to walk far and go to distant places, entered into the cities to get a livelihood by begging; and thus many villages and hamlets were left destitute of inhabitants. They did not however escape punishment...; for the pestilence came upon them in the places where they went, and even overtook those who entered into Edessa; about which I shall tell presently to the best of my ability, though no one, I think, could describe it as it really was.

W. Wright (transl. and notes), *The Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite, composed in Syriac, A.D. 507* (Cambridge 1882), pp. 27-9, non vidimus = Garnsey, P. , *Famine and Food-supply in the Graeco-Roman world. Responses to Risk and Crisis*, (Cambridge 1988), p. 3.