



Summary :

A famine which was caused by climatic changes and afflicted Antioch and Coele-Syria for approximately one year, from 384 until 385. During the same period an unidentified epidemic afflicted the city, which decimated a large number of the already exhausted by the famine inhabitants.

Date

384-385

Geographical Location

Antioch on the Orontes (province of Coele-Syria)

1. Outbrake of the famine

A famine which lasted for almost one year afflicted [Antioch on the Orontes](#) from 384 until 385. Meanwhile an unidentified epidemic appeared in the city causing many victims. More specifically, an unusually long drought had stroke the whole area of the Mediterranean basin already from 383. The damage to the grain cultivations had resulted into the decrease of production and consequently to the limited availability of these products and the abrupt increase of their price.¹

2. Confrontation, reactions

In order to secure that the financially weaker urban masses would be able to purchase bread, the governor of [Coele-Syria](#) regulated a specific, low price for the selling of this kind of foodstuff. This, however, had the opposite result, since bakers had to buy their feedstock in a higher price than the one they had to sell the final product. Thus, they massively abandoned the city, in which a sudden famine broke out.

3. Crisis management

The bad climatological conditions continued also during the winter of 384/385 when heavy and lengthy rains destroyed the grain harvest once again. Meanwhile, an unidentified epidemic broke out in Antioch and decimated a large number of the, already exhausted from the famine, inhabitants. Its duration was apparently not long. After an intervention of the local [senator](#) and famous orator [Libanius](#), a compromise was achieved between the administration and the bakers, ending the crisis in a short time.²

1. Downey, G., *A History of Antioch in Syria from Seleucus to the Arab Conquest* (Princeton 1961), p. 420.

2. Our information concerning the crisis derives from speeches of Libanius, Orat. I 226-227, 233, XXVII 3, 6, 14, 27, XXIX 2-7. Cf. A.M. Jones, *Later Roman Empire. A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey*, 2, p. 810.

Bibliography :



Jones A.H.M., *The Later Roman Empire, 284-602. A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey, 1-2*, Oxford 1964



	Downey G. , <i>A History of Antioch in Syria from Seleucus to the Arab Conquest</i> , Princeton – New Jersey 1961
	Petit P. , <i>Libanius et la vie municipale à Antioche au IVe siècle après J.-C.</i> , Paris 1955
	Stathakopoulos D. , <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
	Garnsey P. , <i>Famine and Food-supply in the Graeco-roman World. Responses to Risk and Crisis</i> , Cambridge 1988
	Stathakopoulos D. , <i>Famine and Pestilence in the late Roman and Early Byzantine Empire: A systematic survey</i> , Ashgate, London 2004
	Palanque J.-P. , "Famines à Rome à la fin du IVe siècle", <i>Revue de Études Anciennes</i> , 33, 1931, 346-356

Glossary :

	senator, the (1. Roman, 2. Byzantine)
<p>1. A Roman body of men that originally advised the king and then the consuls; Hereditry was not the only means of joining the senate and "new men" or <i>novi homines</i> could become part of it; Augustus revised the senate and left the body with less power and bolstered hereditary claims as a means to enter the senate; it continued to make laws and conferred powers on new emperors.</p> <p>2. Member of the senate. The senate, a roman institution transferred from Rome to Constantinople by Constantine I during the Byzantine period was an advisory body whose rights and responsibilities were not clearly defined. It was consisted of imperial officers coming from the upper and were ranked according to hierarchical levels: <i>virii illustri</i> (perfectus praetoriae and the magister), <i>virii spectabili</i> (proconsul, vicarius and the comes), <i>virii clarissimi</i> (consul praetoriae) and <i>virii perfectissimi</i> (praeses and duces). Since the 6th c. AD a new title was established for the upper officers (<i>virii gloriosi</i>). The years that followed officials were entitled to officers regardless their position as senators or if they were about to be admitted to this body.</p>	

Sources

Libanius, Orat. I 226-227, 233, XXVII 3, 6, 14, 27, XXIX 2-7 in Foerster, R. (ed.), *Libanii opera*, vols. 1.1, 2 (Leipzig, 1.1:1903; 2:1904; repr. O. Hildesheim 1963) [on the first speech, see also Norman, A. F. (ed.) *Libanius Autobiography (Oratio I)*, (Oxford 1965)].

Quotations

Libanius on the famine of 384 in Antioch

1. οὗτος ἐν λιμῷ κατειλήφει τὴν πόλιν. τοῦτον μείζω τὸν λιμὸν ἐποίουν αἱ κατὰ τῶν σιτοποιῶν ἀπειλαί. εἶθ' οἱ μὲν ἀποδράντες ἔσωζον ἑαυτούς, ἄρτος δὲ οὐδαμοῦ, πυροῦ δὲ ἐλπίδες, καὶ κακῶς δ' ἂν ποιήσειε τὸ πεινῆν. ἡ μὲν οὖν πόλις οὐδὲν διέφερε χειμαζομένης νεώς, ἐγὼ δὲ εἰσδραμῶν παρὰ τὸν ἄρχοντα μετὰ πόνου μὲν, παύω δ' οὖν βλαβερὰν φιλονεικίαν. ἀπιστία δὲ εἶχε τοὺς σιτοποιοὺς, ὥς οὐχ ἀλώσονται φανέντες, καὶ ἅπασαι ὑποσχέσεις ἀσθενεῖς πλὴν μιᾶς τῆς ἐμῆς. (227.) ὥς δὲ εἶπον δεῖν θαρρεῖν ἐκβαλόντας τὸ δέος καὶ ἦκεν οὗτος εἰς τὰ ὄρη τε καὶ τὰς νάπας ὁ λόγος, ἦσαν πρὸ ἐσπέρας ἐν τοῖς αὐτῶν ἕκαστος, καὶ πρᾶγμα οὐκ ἂν ἐλπισθὲν ἔωθεν ἔωρᾶτο, δρόμος οὐδεὶς ἐπ' ἄρτους· αἴτιον δὲ τὸ πλῆθος αὐτῶν. τοῦτο μετὰ τῆς Τύχης πεπρᾶχθαι μοι φαῖν ἂν. διὸ τῶν εὐλειτουρηκώτων χρησιμώτερος ἐκεκρίμην τῇ πόλει· τοὺς μὲν γὰρ ἐν σωζομένη πεποιῆσθαι τῇ πόλει τὴν δαπάνην, ὑπ' ἐμοῦ δὲ αὐτὴν σεσῶσθαι.

Libanius, Orat. I 226-227, R. Foerster (ed.), *Libanii opera* 1.1.

2. Ἔτερον τοῖνυν ἀκούσατε. τοῦ λιμοῦ τὴν πόλιν ἡμῖν πτωχῶν ἐμπεπληκός, ὧν οἱ μὲν ἐκ τῶν ἀγρῶν ἀνέστησαν οὐκ οὔσης αὐτοῖς οὐδὲ πῶας ἐν γε χειμῶνι, οἱ δὲ πόλεις τὰς αὐτῶν καταλελοίπεσαν, καὶ βοθηθείας αὐτοῖς τινος ἐκ τοῦ δικαστηρίου παρὰ τῆς



Εὐμολπίου φιλανθρωπίας εὐρημένης παρακαλούμενος ὑπ' ἑμοῦ πρὸς τὰ αὐτὰ δεινὸν εἶναι λέγοντος, εἰ τῆς ἐλάττονος ἀρχῆς ἢ
μείζων ἐν τοιούτῳ καιρῷ φανείται χείρων,

Libanius, Orat. XXVII, 6, R. Foerster (ed.), *Libanii opera* 2.