

Public Agents and the Famine in the First Centuries of the Middle Ages

Os agentes públicos e a fome nos primeiros séculos da Idade Média

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RESUMO A Alta Idade Média foi um período marcado por sucessivas crises alimentares. De acordo com um levantamento nas histórias, anais, crônicas, hagiografias etc., feito no início do século XX pelo historiador alemão Fritz Curschmann, há 68 menções a crises alimentares entre os anos 700 e 1100. No entanto, esses textos dizem mais sobre as reações à fome do que sobre as circunstâncias ou causas das mesmas. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar comparativamente as ações dos agentes públicos em face de situações de crise alimentar, tanto na Gália quanto na Itália, entre o final do século V e o final do século VI. Para tanto, utilizar-se-ão cartas de Cassiodoro († c.585) e de Sidônio Apolinário († 486), bem como as *Histórias* de Gregório de Tours († 594) e um poema de Venâncio Fortunato († c.609). A análise desses textos permite que se coloque em xeque a ideia da crise da autoridade pública com o advento dos reinos bárbaros.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE fome, Gália, Itália, Alta Idade Média

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ABSTRACT The Early Middle Ages was marked by successive food crises. According to a survey made by the German historian Fritz Curschmann (in the histories, annals, chronicles, hagiographies, etc.), there are 68 references to food crises between the years 700 and 1100. However, these texts say much more about the reactions to hunger than on their circumstances or causes. The aim of this article is to analyze the actions of public officials in the face of food crises in Gaul and Italy between the end of the fifth century and the late sixth century. For this purpose, we use some letters of Cassiodorus († c. 585) and Sidonius Apollinaris († 486), the *Histories* by Gregory of Tours († 594) and a poem by Venantius Fortunatus († c.609). The analysis of these texts allows us to put into question the idea of public authority crisis with the advent of barbarian kingdoms.

KEYWORDS famine, Gaul, Italy, Early Middle Ages

In the second half of the 530s, Cassiodorus, Praetorian prefect of Italy at that moment, had to confront a severe food shortage in the Peninsula. The extent of this crisis is known, firstly, by the great quantity of sources that mention it, and to others that we will return later in this article; secondly, by the number of letters written by Cassiodorus on the subject. We find no less than six of them penned only in the Autumn of 537. The first letter was sent to the inhabitants of Istria, requesting them to send wheat, wine, and olive oil to Ravenna, which should have been taken from the surplus from the previous crop in the province (Cassiodorus, 1894, XII, 22).¹ The second one was addressed to Laurentius, with instructions for the implementation of measures established in the first letter (Cassiodorus, 1894, XII, 23). In the first known mention to Venice, Cassiodorus wrote the third letter to boat owners of the coast of Istria, asking them to transport olive oil and wine

1 CASSIODORUS, *Variae*. MOMMSEN, Theodor (ed.). *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* (MGH), *Auctores Antiquissimi* (AA), t. XII. Berlin: Weidmann, 1894.

from Istria to Ravenna (Cassiodorus, 1894, XII, 24). The fourth letter was addressed to one of his representatives in charge of supply, Ambrosius, whom Cassiodorus calls to collect the product of the previous and abundant harvest to tackle the shortage that was announced for the following months (Cassiodorus, 1894, XII, 25). In the fifth letter, Cassiodorus accepted a request from the inhabitants of the province of Venetia to exempt them from overdue taxes on wine and wheat owned by the cities of Concordia, Aquilea and Forum Julii (Cividale del Friuli) (Cassiodoro, 1894, XII, 26). Finally, the sixth letter was written to the bishop of Milan, Datus, asking to open the barns in Tricus (Pavia) and Dortona (Tortona) (Tortona) (Cassiodoro, 1894, XII, 27).

The regularity and dates of the letters show an intense and relatively forthright reaction to the famine, even if we do not have means to assess the efficacy of the measures undertaken. We do not know to what extent its application brought the expected outcomes. Aside from the number of letters, if we pay attention to the content of the measures proposed by Cassiodorus, we come to a complete picture of the Ostrogothic public administration in the face of famine. The letters show not only that public agents had the record of the harvests' results in each province at their disposal, but also that they took measures to ensure the transportation of foodstuff to the provinces to which they were assigned, to store the harvests upon prediction of an upcoming shortage, to forgive the taxes of the provinces worst affected by famine, and to open the granaries to the malnourished population.

In addition to the measures predicted in Cassiodorus' letters written in the Autumn of 537, the gravity of the food crisis — or at least its exceptionality — can also be perceived through the description of its causes. These causes were enumerated in the fourth letter, written in 538, whose receiver was Ambrosius, one of his representatives in charge of provisions. Cassiodorus requested him to collect the harvest of previous and bountiful terms to stave off the shortage predicted to strike in the following months. Cassiodorus mentioned a meteorological phenomenon, which seemed to be the origin of the famine that was then upon

them. There would be no rational explanation for this phenomenon that would have alarmed men: extraordinary signs would have appeared in the sky, and the sun's luminosity would have faded, making it to turn bluish. It would not be possible to see the shadow of your body at noon, nor to feel the heat of the sun. In Cassiodorus's account, it appears that the effects observed during the Eclipse would have been felt for a whole year. Even the full moon would have lost its natural splendor. In addition to this picture, there would have been a winter without storms, a spring without warmth, and a summer without heat. Cassiodorus also describes the consequences of prolonged droughts and out-of-season hoar frost to the crops: in the months in which they should be ripe, they seemed to have been chilled by Boreas. The crops, which needed mild rainfall, could no longer be found on the impoverished earth (Cassiodoro, 1894, XII, 25).²

Procopius of Caesarea, in his text dedicated to the war against the Vandals, also mentions an "extraordinary marvel" that would have occurred in the tenth year of Justinian's reign (536). The sun would have

2 [1] *Plerumque solliciti fiunt, qui mutatos rerum ordines intuentur, quia saepe portendunt aliqua, quae consuetudini probantur adversa. nihil enim sine causa geritur nec mundus fortuitis casibus implicatur, sed quicquid venire videmus ad terminum, divinum constat esse consilium. suspenduntur homines, cum sua reges constituta mutaverint, si aliter induti procedant quam eorum usus inoleverat. quis autem de talibus non magna curiositate turbetur, si versa vice consuetudinum a sideribus aliquid venire videatur obscurum? nam sicut certa securitas est suis vicibus tempora notare currentia, sic magna curiositate complemur, cum mutari talia sentiuntur.* [2] *Quale est, rogo, stellarum primum conspicere et eius solita lumina non videre? lunam noctis decus intueri orbe suo plenam et naturali splendore vacuatam? cernimus adhuc cuncti quasi venetum solem: miramur media die umbras corpora non habere et vigorem illum fortissimi caloribus usque ad extremi teporis inertiam pervenisse, quod non eclipsis momentaneo defectu, sed totius paene anni agi nihilominus constat excursu.* [3] *Qualis ergo timor est diutius sustinere quod vel in summa solet populos celeritate terrere? habuimus itaque sine procellis hiemem, sine temperie vernum, sine ardoribus aestatem. unde iam speretur posse venire temperiem, quando menses qui fructus decoquere poterant boreis flatibus vehementer algebant? quid enim fertilitatem producat, si terra aestivis mensibus non calescat? quid germen aperiat, si matrix pluviam non resumat? duo haec elementis omnibus probamus adversa rigorem perpetuum et contrariam siccitatem. mutaverunt se tempora non mutando et quod mixtis imbribus solebat effici, ex ariditate sola non potest optineri [...].*

appeared without its rays, just like the moon, casting a feeble light as if it was fading. From this point on, the Romans would have been struck by war, famine and the most disastrous of calamities (Procópio de Cesareia, 1833, XIV, 4-10).³ Procopius also describes the desolation of the famine that overwhelmed Italy in 538 and even mentions cases of cannibalism (Procópio, 1833a, II, 20).⁴ Because of the similarities between their accounts as well as the dates in which the facts they describe would have transpired, it is clear that Cassiodorus and Procopius are referring to the same phenomenon. But they are not the only ones. In the second half of the 13th century, Michael the Syrian [† 1199], wrote a chronicle in which he too referred to an extraordinary meteorological phenomenon in 536, likely recapitulating Procopius' account. This chronicle (?) was not, decidedly, the case of two Irish Annals, the Annals of Ulster (compiled in the end of the 15th century) and the Annals of Innisfallen (written between the 13th and the 15th century). They employed the same formula for describing the events of 536: "failure of bread". Even if they failed to mention extraordinary events, both of them highlighted the shortage of bread, which could have been a result of the same facts told by the authors above. That, however, is mere speculation. Yet, more surprising is that the Chronicles of Japan, a set of some of the oldest accounts of Japanese history to have reached us, also mention a famine in 536 (*Chronicles of Japan*, 1896, p.34-35).⁵ As with the Irish Annals, nothing is said in regards to the marvels mentioned by Cassiodorus, Procopius of Caesarea and Michael the Syrian.

Perhaps this prodigy described in great detail is nothing more than a literary construction, transmitted from one source to another because of its unique appearance. The fact that chronicles and annals in Japan

3 PROCÓPIO DE CESAREIA. *De Bello Vandalico*, t. I. NIEBUHR, Barthold Georg (ed.). Bonn, 1833, p.307- 534 (*History of the Wars*. ed. e trad. DEWING, H.B. Cambridge: MA, 1928).

4 PROCÓPIO DE CESAREIA. *De Bello Gothico*, t. II. NIEBUHR, Barthold Georg (ed.). Bonn, 1833a, p.3-643 (*History of the Wars*. ed. e trad. DEWING, H.B. Cambridge: MA, 1928).

5 *Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697*, vol. 1. Londres: Japan Society, 1896.

and Ireland mentioned a food crisis precisely at the year 536 may suggest that there was, in fact, a large-scale weather phenomenon, unless everything had been just a coincidence — that is, the advent of several unrelated food crises in Italy, Ireland, and Japan in the same year.

However, dendrochronological analyses conducted on wild multi-centennial oaks in Ireland indicate the occurrence of freezing Summers around 536. Comparative studies made with multi-centennial trees in North America, Mongolia, and Argentina, have arrived at similar results. According to estimates, the decrease in growth rate observed in these trees must have corresponded to a decline in global temperature between 536 and 545 that scientists believe to have been in the magnitude of 3 degrees Celsius (Simmons, 2008, p.18). It is likely that the large-scale meteorological phenomenon circa 536 described by scientists corresponds to the marvels referred by Cassiodorus, Procopius, and Michael.

The low temperatures verified for that period have only been surpassed in severity by the so-called “little ice age” between the 15th and 17th centuries. It is necessary, therefore, to give credit to the descriptions we find in Cassiodorus, Procopius of Caesarea and Michael the Syrian: there was, indeed, an extraordinary weather phenomenon circa 536. There are currently two major explanations about what could have happened. The first is the occurrence of a powerful volcanic eruption (Larsen, 2008); the second, the impact caused by an asteroid or comet (Rigby; Symonds; Ward-Thompson, 2004, p.24). To what pertains the second hypothesis, the impact of the comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 against the planet Jupiter in 1994 provided scientists with a good benchmark for what could have occurred in 536. The decrease in temperature in 536 would have been the consequence of a large quantity of dust and debris cast into the atmosphere, be it by the eruption, or by the impact of a massive celestial object (we must keep in mind that the texts speak of a decrease in the intensity of sunlight). However, traces of such an object’s impact are still to be found, and so are those of a volcanic eruption. Perhaps, future exploration of oceanic depths will eventually provide evidence in one direction or another.

Regardless, the role of these weather events in famine in Italy is not very clear. The *Liber Pontificalis* mentioned a famine that reached the entire world in 536, according to Bishop Datius, Milan; in Liguria, women ate their own children (*Liber Pontificalis*, 1886, LX).⁶ Although this hunger coincided chronologically with the extraordinary event that speaks Procopius, this event was not mentioned in *Liber*, which exhaustively described conflicts opposing Belisario's armies and Ostrogothic troops. The sieges of cities, the looting, and the destruction of crops may have aggravated the extent of the food crisis. Whatever the role of atmospheric events in the collapse of crops in Italy, the fact is that there was a major food crisis in the years that followed the 536. It may explain why some populations had their vulnerability to diseases increased, and, thus, the extent of the Plague of Justinian itself (Rigby; Symonds; Ward-Thompson, 2004, p.26). This situation is one of the greatest challenges for those who study the food crisis: the fact that it is quite difficult, sometimes impossible, to isolate only one phenomenon to explain it.

Our intention in this text is not to discuss the climatic event in 536 itself, but, above all, to consider the responses of public agents in Italy towards the famine that chronologically followed it. Subsequently, we will compare these responses to what occurred in Gaul after the food crisis that at the end of the 5th century. This comparison is necessary because Gaul and Italy constitute two antipodal points regarding the survival of public authority in the interpretation of traditional history: the Kingdom of the Ostrogoths would be the most romanized of the barbarians kingdoms while the Kingdom of the Franks would be the least one. From political history's account, it would mean the absence of

⁶ *Eodem tempore tanta fames fuit per universum mundum, ut Dacius episcopus civitatis Mediolanensis relatione sua hoc evidenter narraverit, quod in partibus Liguria mulieres filios suos comedissent penuria famis, quas retulit ex Ecclesiae suae fuisse familia. Liber Pontificalis.* DUCHESNE, Louis. *Le Liber Pontificalis, texte, introduction et commentaire*, 2 vols.. Paris: E. Thorin, 1886-1892.

a public authority in Gaul and its continuity in Italy. The study of diverse reactions to famine in both regions can put this perspective to the test.

An analysis of the whole set of Cassiodorus' letters reveals that, in the face of the gravity of the food crisis, there was a series of measures taken by the central power to confront the problem. Among these measures, there were price control, prohibition of foodstuff exportation, purchase of food from provinces which had had a good harvest in the previous year, distribution of grain from the granaries in the cities most affected by famine. In the letter sent to Ambrosius, Cassiodorus recalled that, due to the exceptionally abundant harvest, its fruits should be collected and stocked to prepare for the scarcity of the months to come (Cassiodoro, 1894, XII, 25).⁷

Cassiodorus wanted to avoid making the weight of taxation fall upon a single province. He introduced a new division of taxes, increasing the burden over Istria, which had had a better harvest than the other provinces. In this way, he sought to avoid having the products requested from this province — wheat, oil and wine — sent somewhere else or abroad. Furthermore, Cassiodorus sent an official to supervise the execution of his measures. It is easy to conclude from Cassiodorus' correspondence that, in the early 7th century in Ostrogothic Italy, there was a coordinated action by public agents against the famine. This action comprised elements of calculation and prediction of harvests, prices of foodstuff, and also of expected shortages in the following months.

The contrast with contemporary events in Gaul around the same time is, at first sight, impressive. The most complete account of food crises in the 5th and 6th centuries in Gaul that we have at our disposal are beyond any doubt those of Gregory of Tours. These crises appear several times throughout his *Histories*, evidencing the author's interest in the matter. This interest sets him apart from other Merovingian authors,

7 “[4] *Atque ideo de veteribus frugibus prudentia tua futuram vincat inopiam, quia tanta fuit anni praeteriti felix ubertas, ut et venturis mensibus provisa sufficiant. reponatur omne quod ad victum quaeritur. facile privatus necessaria reperit, cum se publicus apparatus expleverit*”.

who have given famine scarce attention. It is the case, specifically, of Fredegar and the author of the *Liber Historiae Francorum*. Let us not, however, deceive ourselves: in Gregory's work, the famine was one of the narrative devices that illustrate the combat of the churches against the heretics. It appeared in the context of great marvels, such as signs in the skies, fires of divine provenance (Gregório de Tours, 1951, V, 33),⁸ or yet at the appearance of a character claiming to be the Christ (Gregório de Tours, 1951, X, 25). On only one occasion in *Histories*, hunger was not associated with the action of a sinner or with prodigies (Gregory of Tours, 1951, VII, 45).

We would now like to concentrate on the bishop of Tours' account of the famine that happened in Burgundy in the late 5th century.⁹ According to Gregory of Tours, in the time of Sidonius Apollinaris, a "great famine" afflicted Burgundy. Since people were scattered throughout many regions and there was no one to give alms to the poor, Ecdicius, a senator and one of Sidonius' close men, having, according to Gregory, placed God in his trust, accomplished something great. Seeing that the famine grew more severe than before, he sent his servants with horses and carts to the cities surrounding his residence so that they could bring

8 GREGÓRIO DE TOURS. *Libri Historiarum X*, MGH, *Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum*, 1. KRUSCH, Bruno; LEVISON, William; HOLTZMANN, Walther (eds.). Hanover: Hahn, 1951.

9 Much of the information available about the Merovingian Gaul, especially regarding the sixth century, is due to Gregory of Tours (c.538-c.593). In an era where the historiographical production was limited to chronic events that did not go beyond regional boundaries, Gregory was an innovator: he intended to write a "universal" history. Born in Clermont (now Clermont-Ferrand, capital of the French department of Auvergne), about 538, Gregory became bishop of Tours in 573. He belonged to a family of senatorial origin with a long tradition of service to civil power and the Catholic Church. It was a relative of the last Gallo-Roman emperor, Avitus; his predecessor in the episcopate of Tours was a cousin of his mother; one of his ancestors was among the first Christian martyrs of Gaul, who were murdered in Lyon in the year 177. Thanks to its position within the ecclesiastical hierarchy, Gregory of Tours was a privileged spectator of the Frankish society; he coexisted with many of the people described in his work: kings, saints, martyrs. His episcopal city was also the center of the cult of Saint Martin, the patron saint of the Merovingian dynasty. As a catholic, Gregory multiplied in his works the defense of orthodoxy and also attacks on heretics, clerical or lay, of Aryan or Jewish confessions. CÂNDIDO DA SILVA; MAZZETTO JR., 2006, p.91-92.

him those whom the famine was torturing. The servants complied with his will and brought to his residence all the poor they could find. Thus, having been fed by Ecdicius during that desolate time, they were saved from fatal hunger. They were over four thousand men and women. Later, when the abundance returned, Ecdicius once more provided transport, delivering each of them to their abodes. Gregory adds that, after the poor had gone home, a voice from heaven was heard by Ecdicius, telling him that, for having done what he did, for having obeyed his words satisfying the poor's hunger, he and his posterity would never lack bread. The bishop of Tours concluded his account on the event by mentioning Saint Patient, bishop of Lyon, who would have carried out a similar act of goodwill for the population during the same famine, as well as a letter in which Sidonius Apollinaris congratulates the bishop in an eloquent manner (Gregório de Tours, 1951, II, 24).¹⁰ This letter has survived, and we will comment on it further on.

It is important to stress three aspects of the Gregorian account. First, the fact that there would be no one to distribute alms to the poor — what reinforces, at first sight, the idea of a breakdown of public authority in late 5th century Burgundy. Second, the fact that the decision to help the poor would have come out of the bishop's initiative, with God as his

10 *De fame Burgundiae et Ecdicio: Sed tempore Sidoni episcopi magna Burgundiam famis oppressit. Cumque populi per diversas regiones dispergerentur, nec esset ullus qui pauperibus alemoniam largiretur, Ecdicius quidam ex senatoribus, huius propinquos, magnam tunc rem in Deo confisus fecisse perhibetur. Nam invaliscente fame, misit pueros suos cum equitibus et plaustris per vicinas sibi civitates, ut eos qui hac inopia vexabantur sibi adducerent. At illi euntes, cunctus pauperes, quodquod invenire potuerunt, adduxerunt ad domum eius, ibique eos per omnem tempus sterelitates pascens, ab interitu famis eximit. Fueruntque, ut multi aiunt, amplius quam quattuor milia promiscui sexus. Adveniente autem ubertate, ordinata iterum evectioem, unumquemque in loco suo restituit. Post quorum discessum vox ad eum e caelis lapsa pervenit, dicens: «Ecdici, Ecdici, quia fecisti rem hanc, tibi et simine tuo panis non deerit in sempiternum, eo quod obaudieris verbis meis et famem meam refectioem pauperum saciaberis». Quem Ecdicium mirae velocitatis fuisse, multi commemorant. Nam quadam vice multitudinem Gothorum cum decim viris fugasse perscribitur. Sed et sanctos Patiens Lugdunensis episcopus simile huic in ipsa fame populis prestetisse perhibetur benefitium. Extat exinde hodieque apud nos beati Sidoni epistola, in qua eum declamaturiae conlaudavit.*

witness. Third, even as Gregory suggests the exceptionality of Ecdicius' acts, he makes references to similar deeds that would have been performed by Patient, bishop of Lyon, during the same famine.

In Gregory's account, just like in Cassiodorus' letters, we find two episodes of shortage involving public agents — in the Italian case, a Praetorian prefect; in the Burgundian one, a senator. The participation of public agents seems to be the only common point between the two accounts. As for the rest, everything leads us to believe that we are facing two distinctively different behaviors. In Cassiodorus' Italy, the act of prediction, the management of scarce resources and a taxation policy took into account previous harvests, a forecast of future harvests, as well as a system of prices and exports control. At the other side of the Alps, the Gregorian account stressed personal initiative, inspired and motivated by divine will. There is, at first, no sign of mobilization of public agents or resources. Even though Ecdicius was a senator, Gregory does not associate his actions towards the famished with the function he exercised, but solely with his personal qualities.

Sidonius Apollinaris' letter to Bishop Patient of Lyon presented an account that beard many similarities with the writings of Gregory. The letter consisted in an extensive commendation of the bishop of Lyon. What interests us more, however, is the excerpt in which Sidonius refers to his assistance to the hungry. He observed that, although Patient shared some of the virtues he listed with his colleagues, other virtues would be his alone: the humanity with which he freely distributed alms around the desolate Gauls and ravaged places, with his own *denarii*, after the incursion of the Goths and the burning of the crops. Sidonius stressed that it would have already been an extraordinary good deed to these people emaciated by famine, if wheat was sold to them as a merchantable good and not given as a gift. He added that he saw the roads full of victuals sent by Patient, as well as more than one granary, that he had filled on his own, alongside the Arar and the Rhone (Sidônio Apolinário,

1887, VI, 12).¹¹ Just like in Gregory's description of Ecdicius' actions, we see in Sidonius' account an emphasis on the exceptionality of the act, as well as on the fact that the bishop provided assistance out of his own resources. The significance of the exceptionality is not quantitative, but qualitative: Gregory and Sidonius presented Ecdicius' and Patient's deeds as derived from a catalog of virtues that both authors unequivocally establish. In both accounts, the stress lies not in the function they performed — senator and bishop, respectively. In Gaul, from the late 5th century to the end of the 6th, the aid to the poor, even when undertaken by men of power, was considered an exceptional fact, stemming from the characters' personal virtues.

The comparison between Cassiodorus' letters, Sidonius', and Gregory's account in his *Histories* adds element to the dossier about the crisis of public authority in the West between the 5th and the 6th centuries. The argument which dates from the works of N.D. Fustel de Coulanges and has held steady ever since, states that, due to the disappearance of the idea of *res publica*, the very notion of public service in Gaul would have been compromised. Thus, the behavior of men of power in the face of famine would show that, in Gaul, the idea of public service had been replaced by personal initiative founded on the imperative of charity.

This argument sounds even more convincing because it is not until as late as 779 that we can find texts from the Frankish royal power detailing measures against the famine (we refer to the *Capitulare Episcoporum*). The Carolingians seem to have been the first ones to have taken steps to curb famines and their effects. Not only that, they accomplished it in

11 *Et horum aliqua tamen cum reliquis forsan communicanda collegis. Illud autem deberi tibi quodam, ut jurisconsulti dicunt, a praecipui titulo, nec tuus poterit ire pudor inficias; quod post Gothicam depopulationem, post segetes incendio absumptas, peculiari sumptu, inopiae communi per desolatas Gallias gratuita frumenta misisti; cum tabescentibus fame populis nimium contulisses, si commercio fuisset species ista, non munere. Vidimus angustas tuis frugibus vias; vidimus per Araris et Rhodani ripas, non unum, quod unus impleveras horreum.* SIDÓNIO APOLINÁRIO. *Epistolae et Carmina*. LUETJOHANN, Christian; KRUSCH, Bruno (eds.). MGH, AA 8. Berlin: Weidmann, 1887.

a systematic manner, as shown by the Frankfurt Capitulary in 794, the Nimèrgue Capitulary in 804, and the texts published during the reigns of Louis the Pious, Charles the Bald and Carloman II. Compared to the Carolingians, the Merovingian princes posed, in light of this documental evidence, a paltry contrast.

We would like to propose another interpretation of the absence of normative texts dealing with the battle against famine in the Merovingian period, without recurring to the argument about the circumstances of transmission or losses of these texts. We will start by Sidonius Apollinaris' letter to Bishop Patient of Lyon (Sidônio Apolinário, 1887, VI, 12).¹² After praising Patient by using examples from the Eleusinian Mysteries, Sidonius apologized for having relied on these texts, and states that, from that point on, he would resort to the story of Joseph. Joseph is the venerated patriarch who, predicting the scarcity that would follow the seven years of abundance, knew how to remedy it easily. He also believed that those who offered assistance during an unforeseeable calamity were no lesser men than Joseph. The reference to Joseph and his capacity to predict the scarcity following the seven years of plenty shows that, in Sidonius' text, management was associated with battling famine. Joseph's example would serve to highlight this managerial dimension. It is important to stress that, in his letter to Ambrosius, Cassiodorus introduced his function as a continuation of the one exercised by Joseph: he reminds Ambrosius that the first to have occupied his current dignity requested that the copiousness of the past should be used to alleviate the shortage of the present (Cassiodoro, 1894, XII, 25).¹³ Sidonius had

12 *Sed si forte Achaicis Eleusinae superstitionis exemplis, tanquam minus idoneis, religiosus laudatus offenditur; seposita mystici intellectus reverentia, venerabilis patriarchae Joseph historiam diligentiam comparemus, qui contra sterilitatem septem uberes annos insecuturam, facile providit remedium quod praevidebat. Secundum tamen moralem sententiam, nihil iudicio meo minor est, qui in superveniente simili necessitate non divinat, et subvenit.*

13 *Sed si hoc divinae providentiae tradatur, satagere non debemus, quando ipsius imperio prodigia quaerere prohibemur. illud tamen sine dubio terrenis fructibus adversarium esse cognoscimus, ubi alimonia consueta nutrirī lege propria non videmus. proinde agat sollicitudo vestra, ne nos unius anni sterilitas turbare videatur, dum sic ab illo primo amministratore dignitatis nostrae provisum est, ut praecedens copia sequentem valuisset mitigare penuriam.*

a similar understanding of Joseph's actions. He predicted (*praevидit*) scarcity and found means to remedy it. Thus, the portrait he paints of Patient carries at least one element in common with Cassiodorus'.

On the other hand, it is necessary to acknowledge that the absence of normative texts about the battle against famine in the Merovingian period is not an exhaustive evidence that Merovingian kings never acted in this sense. Of course, this does not prove they did, either. However, some clues deserve to be taken into account. Gregory of Tours, in his *Histories*, said that the king Clothar ordered all churches in the kingdom to surrender a third of their income to its revenue. Although the bishops consented to and signed this decree against their will, the courageous Injuriosus refused to do so. He told the king that, if he intended in taking God's goods, the Lord would quickly take his kingdom because it would be iniquitous that the king's granaries would be filled with the sheaf of the poor, whom he was obliged to feed with his own granary (Gregório de Tours, 1951, II, 2).¹⁴ If this excerpt does not prove the definite existence of the king's assistance to the poor in the Merovingian period, though it reveals the existence of an expectation of it, at least in the Episcopal circles.

Also, there are several examples of measures dedicated to the needs of the poor in the Conciliar Canons. The 5th Canon of the Council of Tours, in 567, proclaimed that each *civitas* should provide sufficient food to the poor and the homeless according to its resources; village priests, as well as the cities' inhabitants, should feed the poor so that they did not drift to other cities (Gaudemet, 1989, p.354).¹⁵ This mea-

14 *Quod Chlothacharius rex tertiam partem fructuum ecclesiis auferre voluit: Denique Chlothacharius rex indixerat, ut omnes ecclesiae regni sui tertiam partem fructuum fisco dissolverent. Quod, licet inviti, cum omnes episcopi consensissent atque subscripsissent, viriliter hoc beatus Injuriosus respuens, subscribere dedignatus est, dicens: «Si volueris res Dei tollere, Dominus regnum tuum velociter auferet, quia iniquum est, ut pauperes, quos tuo debes alere horreo, ab eorum stipe tua horrea repleantur».*

15 *Ut unaquaeque civitas pauperes et egenos incolas alimentis congruentibus pascat secundum vires; ut tam vicani presbyteri quam civitates omnes suum pauperem pascant. Quo fiet, ut ipsi*

sure was not resort to a rhetoric of salvation using the aid to the poor as a theoretical reference (and there were a lot of cases in this sense), but a routine obligation, described as an integral part of the exercise of clerical functions.

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to consider Ecdicius and Patient as mere “private parties.” Ecdicius was not only born into a senatorial family, but his father was emperor Avitus (Jordanes, 1882, 240).¹⁶ He was the brother of Papiantilla, wife of Sidonius Apollinaris. Gregory of Tours and, even more so, Sidonius, make reference to a military feat performed by Ecdicius that would have occurred around 471, when he managed to break the Visigothic siege and enter Clermont with eighteen men. Sidonius also states that Ecdicius encouraged Latin studies among the inhabitants of Auvergne, who supported the Roman cause. He also says that long before being raised to the dignity of patrician, Ecdicius proved himself worthy of it, not by wielding the scales of justice, but by fighting with a weapon in hand (Sidônio Apolinário, 1887, V, 16). It was not like a “particular” that he fed the poor when there was the famine described by Gregory of Tours and Sidonius. If this had been the case, the praise of the bishop of Tours on the charity of this character would make perfect sense. However, it was not a simple “particular”. The first reference to Ecdicius in the letters of Sidonius mentioned citizens of Auvergne wishing his return (Sidonius Apollinaris, 1887, II, 1). His absence would be fatal to the mother country (Sidonius Apollinaris, 1887, III, 2). Sidonius also stated that Ecdicius encouraged Latin studies among the inhabitants of Auvergne, who supported the cause of Rome. His letters also said that long before he was elevated to the rank of patrician, Ecdicius became worthy of it, having in his hands the scales of justice, but

pauperes per ciuitates alienas non uagentur. Conciliae Galliae (v.511-695). DE CLERCQ, Charles (ed.). *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 148A*. Turnholt: Brepols 1963. [*Les canons des conciles mérovingiens (VI-VII siècles)*. Introduction, traduction e notas : GAUDEMET, Jean; BOISDEVANT, Brigitte. *Sources Chrétiennew*, 2 vols.. Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 1982-1989].

16 JORDANES. *Getica*. MOMMSEN, Theodor (ed.). *MGH AA*, 5/1. Berlin: Weidmann, 1882.

fighting with weapons in their hands (Sidonius Apollinaris, 1887, V, 16). There is further evidence of the political role of Ecdicius in the time of the famine mentioned by Sidonius — this hunger that is closely related to the action of the Visigoths in Burgundy (Sidonius Apollinaris, 1887, VI, 12). Jordanes said that when Clermont was taken by the Visigoths, Ecdicius was the general who commanded the city and already had the patrician title. He was then called by the emperor Nepos to go to Italy; later, he was replaced by Orestes (Jordanes, 1882, 240-241).

Ecdicius' actions, such as depicted in Sidonius' correspondence, exhibited a public character. Would there be, then, a contradiction in his account? A public character in military feats and a private character in the assistance to the poor? We should not forget that Sidonius' account was written as a panegyric to laud his brother-in-law's political career. The excerpt in which he mentioned how Ecdicius sated the hunger of the poor with his own resources did not stretch from the rule. Actions for the benefit of the poor performed by the Roman senatorial aristocracy also involved the private resources of great public characters. This ostensive generosity was a means to demonstrate an aptitude to the exercise of public functions within the *civitas*.

Everything that it is known about Patient of Lyon comes practically from what we can piece from Sidonius Apollinaris. Sidonius presented him as a “holy men; brave, harsh, compassionate and who, by his abundant generosity and humanity towards the poor, gives the highest impression of his virtue” (Sidônio Apolinário, 1887, I, 10). He also presented him as a great builder, describing the church he had built in Lyon with extensive details (Sidônio Apolinário, 1887, II, 10), as well as mentioning the numerous basilicas he had edified. As bishop of the city of Lyon, he was also the highest ecclesiastical authority in the province (Sidônio Apolinário, 1887, IV, 25). Sidonius also said that he was frequently invited to the table of King Chilperic (Sidônio Apolinário, 1887, VI, 12). This champion of Nicene orthodoxy found in Gregory and Sidonius the pitchers of his actions on behalf of the hungry poor. Judging from the Life of St. Germanus of Auxerre, work that he commissioned, written

by Constantius of Lyon, the fight against heresy seems to have been the main theme of his pontificate.

The accounts we just analyzed do not gloss over the fact that Ecdicius and Patient were public agents. Gregory clearly stated that the former was a senator and the latter a bishop. Sidonius indicated his title by addressing his letter to Patient. The positions of senator and bishop brought with them a series of responsibilities that included aiding victims of famine, which Sidonius was not supposed to ignore. But we ought to take into account the propensity to present the actions of all characters in light of the struggle between saints and sinners that the Gregory himself mentioned in the preface to the *Histories* as a key to the reading of his work. It is very likely that the actions of the public agents were presented in this same fashion in Episcopal writings throughout the 6th century. One of the best examples in this regard is one of Venantius Fortunatus's poems.¹⁷ The text in question is a tribute to an Austrasian count called Sigoaldus.

The *Carmina* are a substantial source of information on Frankish Royalty: in its eleven books, there are thirty poems dealing with kings or queens. Shortly after his arrival in Gaul, Fortunatus spoke in Metz epithalamiums of the wedding of Sigebert and Brunhilda, followed by a brief eulogy to mark the conversion of Brunhild to Catholicism. Then in Paris, he gave a long eulogy dedicated to King Charibert (561-567); he wrote two poems, the first one about the Church of Paris, the second one about the gardens of Ultrogota, Childebert I's widow (511-558). In 570, he wrote a long text about the death of Princess Galswinta. In 573, when

17 Venantius Honorius Fortunatus Clementianus was born around Trevisa in the early 6th century. He arrived in Gaul in 565. He became a monk around 576 and then bishop of Poitiers, a function he held until his death around 600. Among his works, there are the *Carmina*, series of eleven books of poems on various characters from Merovingian Gaul — kings, queens, aristocrats, bishops, etc. — as well as several hagiographies: the Saint Radegonda's Life, the Life of St. Martin, the Life of St. Germanus of Paris, the Life of Aubin of Angers, the Life of St. Pattern of Avranches, the Life of Marcellus of Paris and to the Life of Seurin of Bordeaux. CÂNDIDO DA SILVA; MAZZETTO JR., 2006, p.101.

Gregory became bishop of Tours, Fortunatus wrote two poems glorifying Sigebert and Brunhild. Fortunatus also pronounced the eulogy to the King Chilperic and Queen Fredegond in 580 at the Council of Berny, which was summoned by Chilperic in order to judge Gregory of Tours. At the same time, he wrote two poems to Chilperic and Fredegond to comfort them for the loss of his two sons, including their epitaph. He also wrote poems in honor of Brunhild and her son Childebert II (575-595) (Cândido da Silva; Mazzetto Jr., 2006, p.101-102).

Let us pay attention, first of all, to its title: “To count Sigoaldus, who gave food to the poor on behalf of the king.” There is no clearer way of affirming that the count’s actions towards famine victims were made in the name of the King. However, just like the *Histories* and Sidonius’s letters, Fortunatus’s text stressed the personal qualities of count Sigoaldus. He also described the aid to the poor in terms that emerge from “commercial” language: the rich gave food to those who were fated to perish, receiving from God, in exchange, plentiful boons. The money that he — the wealthy man — distributed on earth was sent to heaven. They would be grains sown envisaging a bountiful harvest. The terms employed in Fortunatus’s text refer to the *felix commercium*. Fortunatus proceeded making a plea for goods and likens the Christ to a sort of treasurer, who safeguards the seed given to the poor and returns it later. Nevertheless, the direct beneficiary of count Sigoaldus’ action would be King Childebert. Sigoaldus was supposed to distribute food supplies to the poor in the King’s name and authority so that the power of the grandson would match that of his grandfather. The efficacy of the action was not in question: Childebert was supposed to enjoy a thriving health and flourish on the throne on which his grandfather (Clotaire I) was seated. The aid to the poor was only one of the domains in which Sigoaldus demonstrated his submission to Childebert. The count also went to St. Martin’s shrine to invoke the saint’s assistance on behalf of the king. While the king governed and worked on his kingdom’s affairs, Sigoaldus was supposed

to act so that the saint would help the prince with his prayers (Venâncio Fortunato, 1881, X, 17).¹⁸

18 Ad Sigoaldum comitem, quod pauperes pro rege paverit.

Actibus egregiis praeconia fulgida fulgent
Laus tua, Christe, sonet, dum bona quisque gerit.
Unde genus hominum placeat, tu, summe, ministra,
Nam nisi tu dederis, prospera nullus agit.
Divitibus largus forte hinc et parcus egenis,
Se ut redimat dives, quando fovetur egens.
Dulciter ista tui pia sunt commercia regni:
Dum escam sumit egens, divitis auget opes,
Pauper ventre satur satiat mercede potentem:
Parva capit terris, praeparat ampla polis.
Divitibus plus praestat egens, quam dives egentis:
Dat moritura cibi, sumit opima Dei.
Dans terrae nummum missurus ad astra talentum,
E modicis granis surgat ut alta seges.
Dent, jactent, spargant, commendent semina Christo,
Hic dare nec dubitent quae reditura manent.
Da: si Christus erit tibi thesaurarius inde;
Praesta inopi, quidquid reddere Christus habet:
Hac animatus ope exposcens meliora Tonantis,
Nec dubitante fide quod Deus ista dabit.
Pro Childebercthi regis florente salute,
Surgat ut in solio qui fuit altus avo
Fiat ut hinc juvenis validis robustior annis,
Ceu viguit proavus, sic sit in orbe nepos,
Ergo suus famulus Sigoaldus, amore fidelis
Pauperibus tribuit, regis ut extet apex.
Hinc ad Martini venerandi limina pergens,
Auxilium Domini dum rogat ipse sui;
Et dum illuc moderans rex pro regione laborat,
Ut precibus sanctus hunc juvet, illud, agit.
Denique procedens * * * sacra festa tenere,
Pauperibus Christi praebuit ipse dapem.
Dispensata placent alimenta per agmina Christi,
Pascitur et populus quem fovet arce Deus.
Plurima caecorum refovetur turba virorum,
Est quibus interna lux Deus, atque via.

In this Fortunatus' poem, we clearly see that individual charity and the actions of public agents are compatible. Even more importantly, the deeds of count Sigoaldus, who was acting on behalf of the King, are presented as personal charity. The count and his family were natives of Austrasia. He was commissioned by King Sigebert I to accompany Venantius Fortunatus in his travels through the Alps from Italy to Gaul. Fortunatus described this journey in poem 16, book XI of the *Carmina*. It is probably the same Sigoaldus who, together with the dukes Rocco and Eudila, and the patrician Alethius, took Wanarcharius' side, mayor of the palace of Austrasia, in favor of Clothar II, and against Queen Brunhild and her grandson Sigebert (Fredegário, 1982, IV, 42).¹⁹ The three poems devoted to Sigoaldus by Fortunatus prove that he was a prominent political figure in Austrasia.

As Fortunatus himself acknowledged, the count gave food to the poor on Childebert's behalf "so that the majesty of the king was manifested". Fortunatus's poem is extraordinary, because it combined a praise of the personal virtues of those aiding famine victims with the recognition that, in doing so, they act as public agents. What this text showed is that in Gaul, during the second half of the 6th century, the two capacities worked in tandem. In other words, the deeds of public agents were described in terms that it highlighted the extraordinary and virtuous

Hic alitur clodus, quem dirigit ordine Christus,
Quique sui Domini pendulus implet opus.
Quis referat tantos memorare sub ordine morbos,
Occurrens pariter, quos sua cura foveat?
Unde catervatim coeuntia millia pascens,
Erogat ut habeat, rex quoque cuncta regat.
Te Fortunatus, comes, hinc, Sigoalde, salutans
Regis [ut] auxilio des meliora precor.

VENANTIUS FORTUNATUS. *Opera Poetica*. LEO, Friedrich; KRUSCH, Bruno (eds.). *MGH, AA. 4/1*. Berlin: Weidmann, 1881, p.1-270; *Appendix Carminum*, p.271-292 (*Poèmes*, ed. e trad. REYDELLET, Marc. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1994).

19 FREDEGÁRIO. *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii scholastici*. KUSTERNIG, Andreas (ed.). *Quellen zur Geschichte des 7 und 8 Jahrhunderts*. Darmstadt: WB, 1982, p.1-325.

character of these agents. Thus, the easiness with which it is possible, at least at first, to oppose the “public” or “private” elements in the battle against famine would have had, respectively, in Cassiodorus’ Italy and in Gaul, at least during the Merovingian period. Thanks to the poem Fortunatus dedicated to count Sigoaldus, we observe that rhetoric is an integral part in the definition of food crises. The latter involves praises of individual actions to omens announcing crises to the benevolent deeds of rulers and public powers. In this account, each one of these elements received a treatment — individually, or as a whole — that helps us understand both the meaning of famine and the duties of rulers and private parties towards the victims of food shortages.

The absence of royal edicts and precepts about famine before the 8th century does not necessarily imply the lack of actions by the public power and their agents towards famine victims before the Carolingians. What is observed in the turn from the 6th to the 7th century is less a shift in the practice of assistance to the starving poor than in the way this assistance is described. The conciliar texts also show that, in the Merovingian period, the assistance to the poor constituted an instrument of public management, in addition to being a practice construed by the bishops as exceptional and rooted in charity.

Let us now return to Cassiodorus’s *Variae*. It is true that, in documentary terms, there is nothing comparable in Merovingian Gaul. That does not mean, however, that aiding the poor was an unfamiliar practice to the public agents. The question concerns, more precisely, the different ways in which this action was described in the *Variae*, on the one hand, and in the texts of Sidonius, Gregory, and Fortunatus, on the other. We should not forget that the *Variae* were an apologia to the Ostrogothic administration (Barnish, 2006, p.xv): Cassiodorus’s letters depicted the action of public authority in terms of efficiency, rapid response, calculation, and prediction. In addition to being managerial instruments, these letters played a role in the commendation of Ostrogothic power. In this sense, they were also not immune to rhetoric. In fact, the truth is quite the opposite. This vulnerability to rhetoric can be glimpsed

from the references to Joseph. Or even when Cassiodorus claimed to be aware that there was a shortage of foodstuff in Gaul, in a letter to count Amabilis. This shortage was a situation that the market, in its constant state of alert, seized as an opportunity to sell goods acquired at a lower price at a higher margin. The admonishment was cleverly followed by Cassiodorus's assurance that sellers would be appeased just as those in need would receive help (Cassiodoro, 1894, IV, 5). It is a means of highlighting the efficiency of the administration.

The purposes of the texts from late 5th and 6th century Gaul that we have at our disposal are noticeably distinct. Sidonius, Gregory, and Fortunatus hoped to stress the extraordinary character of the actions of the characters they describe. The actions of Patient, Ecdicius, and Sigoaldus for the benefit of the famished were portrayed as exceptional manifestations of charity. One of evidences that these authors' descriptions, in Gaul, transcended the traditional role of the keepers of public functions under the Roman Empire can be found in Sidonius's letter. According to him, Patient distributed food supplies 'with his own denarii' and beyond the ecclesiastical province in which he was, in principle, obliged to do so (Sidônio Apolinário, 1887, VI, 12). One of the principal merits of the recent work on Gregory's *Histories* was to combat the widespread opinion in the French historiography of the first half of the twentieth century. According to Gregory of Tours the historiography was "ignorant" and "naive." W. Goffart recognized in the works of Gregory of Tours a conscious plan, a philosophy of history and even a satirical style. Gregory would have exposed this philosophy in the prolog of his second book when he describes the deeds of saints, the tragedies of the people and the wars of the kings. This mixture constituted the very essence of the history to the Bishop of Tours. This history, in which coexisted the blessed and doomed to damnation, could not result either in progress or decline, contrary to expectations of Orosius and Jerome. Its essence, from the Creation, would be the dichotomy between holiness and human actions (Goffart, 1988, p.124-256). In the opinion of M. Heinzemann, Gregory combines the edifying account of various events

of his time with a structure of chapters of books expressing, at the same time, a model of society and an eschatological concept of the Christian history itself (Heinzelmann, 2001; Cândido da Silva; Mazzetto Jr., 2006, p.93-94). Gregory's account about Ecdicius makes sense in a history marked by the opposition between saints and sinners.

CONCLUSIONS

This article began by evoking the famine of 530 years and its effects in Italy. Through this example, we planned to put the question of the role of climatic factors in triggering famine. It is not a simple task. The texts that we have, as well as in the archaeological remains turn it hard to distinguish the hungry that emerged from conflicts that ravaged the peninsula, from the one derived from climatic factors. Cassiodorus highlighted the role of climatic events, while Procopius, though do not hide these incidents, did not hesitate to mention the war (which is, after all, the subject of his work) and their role in the food crisis. Nevertheless, we must remember that from the perspective of Cassiodorus, highlighting the role of conflicts against the imperial army would mean to recognize the limitations or the incompetence of the Ostrogothic administration. As we saw above, that was not the purpose of the letters of Cassiodorus. In the case of Procopius, the association between war and famine appeared sharply. Climatic events appeared in his work as the status of a sign: after the sun has arisen without rays, the Romans would have been affected by war, hunger and more disastrous calamities (Procopius, 1833, XIV, 4-10). Adding further complications, there is the fact that the *Liber Pontificalis* did not mention climate events, but described the famine in relation to the conflict between the armies of Belisario and the Ostrogothic troops. Maybe Cassiodorus had deliberately exaggerated the role of weather events, to undervalue the burden of the conflict with the imperial army and thus enhance the effectiveness of Ostrogothic administration.

If we observe the two great currents proposing theories to explain the famine — the “neo—Malthusian” and the Entitlement Approach - climate

issues do not constitute the axis around which hunger is explained. The great originality of the Entitlement Approach is to disassociate the phenomenon of famine from food production or agriculture development. The approach associate it with the whole functioning of the economy, more precisely, with the political and social conditions that interfere with the ability of individuals to obtain food for their survival and the maintenance of their health. The climate dimension is not taken into account by the supporters of Entitlement Approach. There are, however, other variables than the economic one, that must be taken into consideration in the study of food crises. This is true, especially when it comes to societies similars to the ones from the Middle Ages, in which agriculture is more fragile and vulnerable to climatic factors than what we observe in modern societies. It is easier to get weather data than data on the nutritional status of populations in the early centuries of the Middle Ages.

Even though the famine that occurred in Italy in 536 had had its origins in weather events mentioned above, its implications were both political and economic. In the early centuries of the Middle Ages, the aid to the hungry was inscribed in the field of public administration, even when the action of its agents was presented from the perspective of individual piety and charity, such as occurred in the Merovingian Gaul. Therefore, the fact that famine responses were shown in Gaul as the result of personal initiatives based on the imperative of charity derived from the nature of the episcopal sources of the sixth century, notably Gregory of Tours and Venantius Fortunatus. We cannot deduce that there was the absence of public authority. Although deeply marked by the rhetoric of personal charity, the poem of Venantius Fortunatus showed very well that the Count Sigoaldus acted in favor of the poor and in the name of royal authority. What happened in 536 was a singular event: either the fall of a comet or a large volcanic eruption produced one of the most important climate change of the past 2000 years and probably the first concordant set of texts about a global crisis. Of course, the reports that we have do not mention the extension of the crisis; none of the authors was able to measure the extent of the famine of 536.

The descriptions of famine have a rhetorical dimension that should not be understated. The literary quality of these descriptions should also be an object of study as they constitute an integral part of the phenomenon: we cannot separate, for analytical purposes, what effectively happened from its description. Fortunatus' and Gregory's eulogies to Sigoaldus and Ecdicius, respectively, show that in the 6th century in Gaul the deeds of public agents in the benefit of the famished poor was presented in terms of a *felix commercium*.²⁰ This idea made more sense in Merovingian Gaul — where, as Jean-Pierre Devroey demonstrated, famine was described as a natural disaster — than in the Carolingian period, in which famine was depicted as the outcome of sin (Devroey, 2014, p.75). From the 8th century on, public agents were much more the warrantors of sins through prayers, fasting and alms. It was in this context that the *Capitulare Episcoporum* (c. 779) — which recommended these remedies to confront famine (called here “current tribulations”) — acquired the full extent of its meaning. The study of the description of the assistance to the famished poor is a means to understand the actions of public agents, especially the ways through which these deeds were presented in the texts.

The texts of the Early Middle Ages are not enough to make us understand the famine itself. They show us more evidence related to the reactions to the famine than to the famine itself. There is no relationship between the description of a food crisis and its intensity. Adjectives used by the authors do not serve to measure the intensity of a food crisis. Likewise, the absence or presence of these adjectives is not enough to conclude that it is a hunger of low intensity. The famine of 536 was not described in any text as universal — even though it was maybe the closest one to that in the Middle Ages. We might add that this also

20 It is also noteworthy that Sidonius Appolinaris did not describe bishop Patient's deeds in terms of a *felix commercium*. He did not engage in an exchange with God, like Ecdicius or Sigoaldus do in Gregory's and Fortunatus' accounts. Sidonius compared him to Joseph, to better stress the actions of someone who offered succor during an unpredicted calamity.

happened because no contemporary author knew the geographic extent of the problem. That has not stopped other food crises to be regarded as “universal” or as to have reached the whole planet. The vocabulary of texts is not enough to help us to understand the intensity of food crises. Therefore, it is necessary to confront the greatest number of texts with data from archeological and climate analysis.

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