

Storms, plagues, speculators. Ancient assessments of the causes of supply shortages in Rome

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At the core of the ancient menu was the so-called Mediterranean triad – grain, olive oil and wine – supplemented by pulses (which were somewhat less prominent, but not less important). However, for those who could afford it, there was a broad range of other foodstuffs at hand – from pork and dormice over garum and moray all the way to cabbage and cinnamon.

For extraordinary foodstuffs in particular, season, location and especially the social position of the consumers were decisive. The availability of grain, though, made in Rome (as well as in any other city of the ancient Mediterranean) the difference between routine and famine. For Rome you could even claim that the decisive foodstuff was wheat – to quite some degree for agricultural and logistic reasons, but also because of cultural preferences. This had consequences even on the linguistic level, where we can observe that grain shortage (or even high grain prices) are basically used synonymously with famine.

Accordingly, a working grain supply was a political problem of the first order in antiquity – and this is the main reason, why we occasionally get to hear something about ancient food crises at all. Basically all Roman historiographers were members of the highest ranks of the elite, which meant that they were hardly ever immediately threatened by hunger themselves. Therefore, they cared preciously little about famines in their own right, but rather about political events triggered by them on the one hand, and about the narrative potential of such crises for the moral judgment of leading figures (especially emperors, along with politicians who dared to challenge the establishment) on the other. However, characterisations of that sort tend to have a largely illustrative function based on a predetermined moral judgement and to be clearly shaped by topoi.

Therefore, from ancient narratives that deal with (alleged) food crises we can learn a great deal about the workings of ancient society, about moral judgements regarding those in power, about priorities of ancient writers and a lot more – but hardly anything reliable about the actual frequency, the likely severity or the exact development of food crises.

