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## FAMINE المجاعات

*Laurent Coulon*

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Short Citation:

Coulon, 2008, Famine. *UEE*.

Full Citation:

Coulon, Laurent, 2008, Famine. In Elizabeth Frood and Willeke Wendrich (eds.), *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, Los Angeles. <http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz000s3mnq>

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1016 Version 1, June 2008

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## FAMINE المجاعات

Laurent Coulon

Hungersnot  
Famine

*In ancient Egypt, food crises were most often occasioned by bad harvests following low or destructive inundations. Food crises developed into famines when administrative officials—state or local—were unable to organize storage and redistribution systems. Food deprivation, aggravated by hunger-related diseases, led to increased mortality, migrations, and social collapse. In texts and representations, the famine motif is used as an expression of chaos, emphasizing the political and theological role of the king (or nomarch or god) as “dispenser of food.”*

الأزمات الغذائية في مصر القديمة كانت في أغلب الأحيان بسبب حصاد ضعيف بعد فيضان منخفض أو مدمر. تطوّرت هذه الأزمات إلى لمجاعات عند فشل المسؤولين الحكوميين أو المحليين في تنظيم التوزيع و التخزين. الحرمان من الغذاء والأمراض المتعلقة بالجوع أدوا إلى نسب وفيات متزايدة، و الهجرة، والإنهيارات الاجتماعية. موضوع المجاعة يظهر بالنصوص والمناظر كتعبير عن الفوضى، مؤكداً الدور السياسي واللاهوتي للملك (أو حاكم إقليم أو إله) ك «موزع الغذاء».

**I**n pre-modern times, food production in Egypt was heavily dependent on cultivation of the Nile Valley lands, watered and fertilized by the annual flood. Because the inundation level was irregular, food crises recurred fairly frequently, ranging from food shortages to famine, a term which, strictly speaking, should be reserved for “critical shortage of essential foodstuffs, leading through hunger to a substantially increased mortality rate in a community or region, and involving a collapse of the social, political and moral order” (Garnsey 1998: 275). The correspondence between Hekanakht, a landowner who lived during the early 12th Dynasty, and his dependents gives an account of the serious difficulties encountered by various strata of society at a time when the Nile only partially

flooded the cultivated lands (Allen 2002: 17, 171). Epigraphic and literary sources give numerous mentions of successive years of low flood, exemplified by the biblical episode in which Joseph interprets Pharaoh’s dream of seven lean cows and seven dried stalks of wheat (Vandier 1936). At the beginning of the First Intermediate Period, Ankhthify’s autobiography (fig. 1) recounts a dark period when, except in his nome, “all of Upper Egypt was dying of hunger and people were eating their children.” Paleopathologic studies also provide cases of nutritional stress and high mortality at various times (Richards 2005: 169; Winckler and Wilfing 1991: 129 - 132), but it is only for the Greco-Roman Period that we possess the papyrological documentation for a historical overview of famines in ancient Egypt; the study of such

documentation shows—not surprisingly—the coincidence of famines with plague epidemics (Casanova 1984).

Famines were also capable of prompting migrations of population. Ankhtifi's autobiography mentions that “the whole country has become like locusts going upstream and downstream.” Migrations probably played a significant role in the birth of Egyptian civilization during the Holocene Period, when drastic climatic changes and increasing aridity may have forced inhabitants of the Western and Eastern Deserts to settle on the banks of the Nile (Hassan 1987; Midant-Reynes 2006; Wendorf and Schild 2002: 18 - 19).



Figure 1. Inscriptions from Ankhtifi's tomb at el-Moalla (Dynasties 9-10).

The consequences of low or destructive inundations depended to a large degree on the ability of administrative officials—state or local—to anticipate subsistence crises: sufficient storage of surpluses from one year to the next and an efficient redistribution system could counter bad harvests (Meeks 2003). Conversely, famine clearly correlates with mismanagement of the state administration—for example, during the 20th

Dynasty, when the workmen of Deir el-Medina were compelled to go on strike to obtain their salaries (Vernus 1993: 80 - 99). The prosperity of the Egyptian state was nevertheless famous throughout the Near East, and New Kingdom pharaohs used grain supplies as diplomatic gifts when their allies, especially the Hittites, were facing starvation (Liverani 1990: 235 - 236); on the other hand, the Egyptian army commonly induced famine artificially, through destruction of harvests and cattle, to subdue foreign enemies (Eichler 2003: 85 - 86).



Figure 2. Starving Bedouin in a relief from the Unas causeway at Saqqara (Dynasty 5).

The Egyptians viewed food deprivation as a liminal experience, approaching chaos (Eichler 2003: 87). Because the experience of chaos was included as a kind of “rite of passage” in the funerary ritual, the deceased were therefore required to suffer hunger and thirst before being regenerated by funerary offerings (Franke 2006b: 106 - 107). The evocation of the elite suffering famine is also an essential feature of the social anarchy described in texts such as *The Prophecy of Neferty* and *The Admonitions of Ipuwer*. Conversely, representations occasionally emphasize the opulence of the Egyptians from the Nile Valley by contrasting them with the starving nomadic tribes, as we see, for example, in 5th-Dynasty reliefs depicting emaciated Bedouin (Hawass and Verner 1996: 182 - 185; Labrousse and Moussa 2002: 85 - 86; fig. 2) and in the 12<sup>th</sup>-Dynasty relief of a cowherd in a tomb of Meir (fig. 3 and see

Blackman 1915: pl. 6). “Nourishing the land” and “giving bread to the hungry” are the basic definitions of the role of the king and high officials (Franke 2006a, 2006b); the evocation of famine in hieroglyphic texts is embedded in this ideological discourse. Recent studies suggest that the repeated evocation of famines in First Intermediate Period texts reflects the employment of a new rhetoric of the nomarch as “dispenser of food,” featuring realistic descriptions rather than the standard clichés (Coulon 1997: 128 - 132; Moreno Garcia 1997). To use these texts as evidence of climatic changes is therefore misleading (Moeller 2005; Seidlmayer 2000), the more so as this self-presentation of the nomarch is still attested during the Middle Kingdom (Simpson 2001). Divine intervention against famine is also a frequent motif of Late Period texts (Heinen 2006), among the most famous of which is the so-called “Famine Stela” at Sehel (fig. 4, from Barguet 1953: pl. 1), a Ptolemaic inscription celebrating the prosperity granted to the region by the god Khnum after a seven-year famine during the reign of Djoser (Barguet 1953; Gasse and Rondot 2007: nos. 542, 336, 562 - 567).



Figure 3. Emaciated cowherd leading cows in front of a rich official. (Meir, tomb B, No. 2, of Senbi's son Ukh-Hotep, Dynasty 12).



Figure 4. Famine Stela at Sehel.

## *Bibliographic Notes*

The study of hunger in antiquity is treated in Garnsey (1998) and a rich bibliography on famine in Egypt and the ancient Near East is provided in Moreno Garcia (1997). The recent discussion by Moeller (2005) brings new arguments against the thesis that the First Intermediate Period was a time of famine induced by climatic change and/or dissolution of the Pharaonic state. Ancient Egyptian texts mentioning famine have been collected in Vandier (1936) and completed by Moreno Garcia (1997), with a useful discussion by Morenz (1998). For Greco-Roman papyrological sources, see Casanova (1984). Among the many designations of, and metaphors for, famine—for example, “the year of the hyenas” (Vandier 1936: 87)—the terms *snb-jb* and *snb-rnpt* are most common. Their meaning has recently been explained by the existence of a root *snb* meaning “sterility” (Dimitri Meeks quoted by Vincent Razanajao 2006: 230).

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- Figure 4. Famine Stela at Sehel. After Barguet 1953, pl. 1.