



Summary :

The riot of the citizens of Antioch in Syria Coele in February 387 is also known as the 'Riot of the Statues'. It was the expression of people's opposition to the economic policy of Theodosius I. The riot raged for half a day and its suppression was marked firstly by the harsh punishment of a great number of citizens and then by the demonstration of the Christian magnanimity of the emperor.

Date

February 387

Geographical Location

Antioch on the Orontes, province of Syria Coele, modern Antakya

1. Historical Background

In the years of Theodosius I (379-395), the wars against the Persians and the Goths as well as the stabilisation of the legal political authority on the throne required money and exhausted the army. The needs of the imperial army and the magnificent celebrations of the works and deeds of the emperor were funded by taxation. Permanent taxes and special charges made survival difficult for the subjects. At the same time, there was no limit in the massive corruption of imperial officials. In [Antioch on the Orontes](#),¹ the citizens died from hardship in prison before they were even tried, the farmers of Syria on the outskirts lost their property for the benefit of big land owners and the **curiales** were losing their economic and political power.² The city had the means to organise and express its reaction: meeting places (baths, hippodrome, theatres), a leading class (curiales) and professionals of the spectacles (who occasionally wrote the salutatories to the officials). The Antiocheans could challenge imperial authority, either by verbally assaults through the **acta** or by violent outbreaks; and they kept defying imperial power throughout the 4th century.³

Antioch suffered in the 380s. It was burdened with the expenses of the conflicts with the Persians on the eastern border and of the reorganisation of the imperial army, which had suffered a debacle in the battle with the Goths at Adrianople in 379. In addition to the usual taxes, the curiales of the city had to pay the special tax for the marine transport of food to barracks on the eastern border, a highly expensive venture. The city was even more loaded down with special charges to cover the expenses required for the golden wreaths intended for celebrating the imperial institution, while a famine in 382 and a deficiency in cereals in 383 and 384 made things worse.

It was probably a special levy that triggered the violent events in Antioch in February 387: the imposition of the tax known as '*aurum coronarium*', which burdened the class of the curiales and funded the celebrations for the imperial institution. The reaction from the curiales, their role during the riot and the conclusions of the inquiries carried out by imperial delegates, all indicate that the class suffered from those charges.⁴ It is less possible that the riot was caused by the imposition of a tax known as '*collatio lustralis*', or *chrysargyron* (paid in gold and silver), which burdened the class of the craftsmen and the merchants and funded the army. This was suggested because of the wide participation of citizens both in the protests and in the violent events. Moreover, the sources talk about gold and silver, when they refer to the payment.⁵ It is very plausible that both levies were imposed at the same time. According to a third version, the contested taxation in question was the '*iugatio capitatio*', a tax paid by everybody; even the farmers, who did not participate in the events, though. According to this view, in 387 the taxes '*iugum*' and '*capitum*' were collected together for the first time in Syria. But this assumption has not been widely accepted.⁶

It should also be noted that the rebellion of the citizens of Antioch in February 387 was the first among a series of riots that broke out in imperial cities and often had a religious background. But the riot of the Antiocheans is presented as an individual event in bibliography, since the riots of the urban populations in that period have not been convincingly applied to a common framework.



2. The Riot

2.1. Outbreak – March of Events

In January 387, Theodosius I (379-395) issued a decree, ordering a special levy on the city of Antioch. It is very possible that it was the class of the *curiales* that was loaded down with this levy. The decree was read out at the court-house, before the *curiales* of the city,⁷ on a February morning, and caused the sharp reaction of the bystanders. They demanded in vain that Celsus, the *consularis* of the [province of Syria Coele](#), exceed his powers and withdraw the clause. Then the Antiocheans reacted impulsively. They initially headed for the residence of the bishop of Antioch, Flavian, but as he was absent at the moment, they returned to the court-house, this time guided by cunning people who agitated them for a riot.⁸

They reached outside the governor's palace on the island⁹ and attempted to invade it, but failed. They proceeded along the stoa connecting the entrance of the island with the forum of Valens and destroyed the hanging lamps of the bath they found on their way. Then they attacked the symbols of the imperial authority: first the uniforms of the officials and then the wooden portraits and iron statues of the emperor and his family, possibly outside the governor's house. They dragged the statues along the roads of Antioch and dismembered them; the little children were playing with the statues' members.¹⁰ They set on fire the house of a *curialis*, who had agreed to the levy the previous morning.

2.2. Suppression

A corps of archers under the *comes Orientis* arrived at noon. The soldiers put the fire out and violently suppressed the riot of the Antiocheans. They arrested most of them and made the *curiales* remain within the city. However, several of them escaped to their mansions in the suburb of Daphne. The meeting places (baths, theatres and the hippodrome) closed down.

3. Consequences and Impact of the Event

3.1. After the Suppression

The arrested citizens were tried on the following morning. The portraits and statues of the members of the imperial family, which were made in Constantinople and were distributed to all the cities of the empire, were symbols of the imperial authority. The attack against them was considered an attack against the emperor himself. The arrested citizens, even the little children, were all were convicted to death; they would to be either decapitated or burnt or mangled by the wild animals of the hippodrome. The punishment was administered on the following days. Most *curiales* were arrested and imprisoned near the *bouleuterion*, in an open-air space that communicated with a nearby garden, where their families settled. Antioch was deprived of its ecclesiastical privileges, and its bishop was subjected to the bishop of [Laodikeia](#). A dead silence prevailed in the city in expectation of the emperor's decisions. The Christians were consoled by the [sermons](#) of the priest [John Chrysostom](#).¹¹ It was rumoured that Antioch was going to be plundered by soldiers and the plunderers who would eradicate the city were already on their way. Some had even seen them (!).

3.2. After the Inquiries

In the meantime, while Caesareus and Hellebichus, the delegates of Theodosius I, were heading for Antioch for the inquiries, the bishop of Antioch, Flavian, arrived in Constantinople to plead with the emperor. Along with the investigators, monks and anchorites also arrived in the city. The anchorite Macedonius demanded that Caesareus should consider that the destruction of the picture of God, that is, human life, would be worse than the destruction of the emperor's picture, as long as the latter was considered as an offence. Caesareus and Hellebichus were convinced that the *curiales* were to blame. Before they announced their conclusions, several families of *curiales* sold their properties and sought refuge in neighbouring regions. However, Caesareus was going to recommend to Theodosius I to show tolerance. It took him only six days to get to Constantinople and inform the emperor. The bishop Flavian had already managed to appease him.



The final decision of Theodosius I was announced on Easter Day of 387, that is, possibly on March 21: amnesty to the Antiocheans and restoration of the city's privileges. Enthusiasm prevailed, as a result of the reconciliation between the city and the emperor. The attitude of the Christians, their calmness in violent situations and their stoicism during the executions and in face of their harsh punishment made great impression. Several pagans became Christians after those events.

1. It is the metropolis of the province of Syria Coele. The name of the Orontes River, which flowed to the west, often accompanies the name of the city (Antioch on the Orontes), as a toponym that distinguishes it from Antioch of Pisidia, although the capital of the Hellenistic East does not need any clarifications in Greek bibliography. More rarely is the toponym Antioch of the Ippos (Ippos being one of its suburbs) found, reminding of the ancient name of the city (Susitha).
2. Libanios describes exactly this situation in his work *De Patrociniiis*; see Libanios, *Libanios' Or. 47: De Patrociniiis*, publ.-trn. Harmand, L. (Paris 1955). He also reports on the habit of the monks to rob the farmers' production, thus making their life harder – a habit decried even by John Chrysostom; see Migne, J.P., publ., *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca* (Paris 1857-1866), v. LXXII, col. 614.
3. Two cases in which the citizens of Antioch voiced their discontent loudly was in 353, when the consularis of Syria Coele, Theophilos, was lynched by the mob, and in 362, when Julian (361-363), who spent the winter in the city during his transfer to the eastern border, was subjected to the verbal assaults of the Antiocheans.
4. Besides, the tenth anniversary of Theodosius' ascension to the throne was to be celebrated in 388 and the cities would paid 'aurum coronarium', while in January 387 the fifth anniversary of the proclamation of Arcadius as coemperor had been celebrated and, consequently, the cities had just paid the same fee. See Browning, R., 'The Riot of A.D. 387 in Antioch', *Journal of Roman Studies* 49 (1952), pp. 13-20, particularly p. 14 and notes 18-23.
5. Lacombrade, C., 'Notes sur l' aurum coronarium', *Revue des études anciennes* (1949), pp. 54-59, and Browning, R., 'The Riot of A.D. 387 in Antioch', *Journal of Roman Studies* 49 (1952), p. 13-20 especially p. 14.
6. From the early 4th century, in the years of Diocletian (284-305), the taxes 'iugo' and 'capitum' were linked together. Although not in a published work, G. E. M. De La Croix assumed that the clause should have concerned one of the earliest cases when the two taxes were paid together in Syria, 'superindictio iugatio capitatio', because the two other versions are not completely satisfactory. See Browning, R., 'The Riot of A.D. 387 in Antioch', *Journal of Roman Studies* 49 (1952), p. 15 and note 30. However, he was not convincing, since it is believed that levying the two fees as a single tax was a permanent taxation policy in the region; see Jones A.H.M., *The Late Roman Empire 284-602, A Social, economic and administrative Survey* (OUP, Oxford 1986), vol. I, pp. 453, 454, 461, 466, although the final settlement of the 'iugatio capitatio' was carried out by Theodosius (379-395); see Καραγιαννόπουλος, Ιω., 'Η θεωρία του Piganiol για την iugatio-capitatio και οι νεώτερες αντιλήψεις για την εξέλιξη των κοινωνικών και των οικονομικών θεσμών στο Βυζάντιο', *Επιστημονική Επετηρίδα Φιλοσοφικής Σχολής του Πανεπιστημίου Θεσσαλονίκης* 8 (1960), *Μνημόσυνο Μανόλη Τριανταφυλλίδη*, pp. 19-46.
7. It is most likely that it was situated in the same complex with the residence of the governor of Syria Coele and that it was part of the governor's palace.
8. According to the sources (see Libanios, *Libanii opera omnia*, publ. Förster, R., vv 12 [Leipzig – Teubner 1903-1927], XXII.5), those people were a 'cunning gang', or a union as we would call it today, that "ἔγγυς τοῦ θρόνου καὶ τῶν τοῦ ἄρχοντος ὁ μὲν τῶν φωνῶν νῆρρηξαν στασιαστικῆν, σὴν μαμὲν νῆρρησαν ἰκεσίαν, ἔργον δὲ ἀπειθείαν". Browning, R., in 'The Riot of A.D. 387 in Antioch', *Journal of Roman Studies* 49 (1952), pp. 13-20, particularly from p. 16 onwards, says that the acta that the crowd cried, that is, their salutations to the officials, were coined by the professionals of the theatre. It is assumed that the curiales made sure they had informed and rewarded the people of the theatre themselves, so that the protest of the citizens could be organised.
9. The island with the residence of the consularis of the province was formed on the northwestern edge of the city by the River Orontes, which flowed to the west of Antioch, from north to south; see Browning, R., 'The Riot of A.D. 387 in Antioch', *Journal of Roman Studies* 49 (1952), pp. 13-20, particularly p. 14.
10. The scene is described by Libanios, see *Libanii opera omnia*, publ. Förster R., vv 12 (Leipzig – Teubner 1903-1927), XXII.8,9.



11. John Chrysostom gave twenty-one (21) sermons before the congregation of Antioch. He praised the Christian way of living in case of both past and future difficulties. He presented the events as an opportunity for internal rebirth. It was then that he was given the epithet 'Chrysostom' (golden-mouthed). The church where he was the pastor remains unknown. Perhaps it was not the grand church built by Constantine I (the Great) (324-337), the octagonal Domus Aurea, which was dedicated to *poenitentia* (penance) and *concordia* (concord); perhaps it was the Church of the Holy Apostles; see Eltester, W., 'Die Kirchen Antiochias im IV. Jh.', *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 36 (1937=1939), pp. 251-286, and Downey, G., *A History of Antioch in Syria from Seleucius to the Arab Conquest* (PUP, Princeton - New Jersey 1961), according to index.

Bibliography :

	Hendy M.F. , <i>Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy c. 300-1450</i> , Cambridge Mass. 1985
	Jones A.H.M. , <i>The Later Roman Empire, 284-602. A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey, 1-2</i> , Oxford 1964
	Petit P. , <i>Libanius et la vie municipale à Antioche au IVe siècle après J.-C.</i> , Paris 1955
	Bouchier A. , <i>A Short History of Antioch 300 BC-1286 AD</i> , Oxford 1921
	Browning R. , "The Riot of A.D. 387 in Antioch", <i>Journal of Roman Studies</i> , 49, 1952, 13-20
	Downey G. , <i>A History of Antioch in Syria from Seleucus to the Arab Conquest</i> , Princeton University Press, Princeton – New Jersey 1961
	Downey G. , "Julian the Apostate at Antioch", <i>Church History</i> , 8, 369-372
	Eltester W. , "Die Kirchen Antiochias im IV. Jh.", <i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i> , 36, 251-286
	Grabar A. , <i>L'empereur dans l'art byzantine</i> , Paris 1936
	Hug A. , <i>Studien über das Klassischen Alterthum I</i> , Freiburg 1886
	Karayannopoulos J. , <i>Das Finanzwesen des frühbyzantinischen Staates</i> , München 1958, Südosteuropäische Arbeiten
	Καραγιαννόπουλος Ι. , "Η θεωρία του Piganiol για την iugatio – capitatio και οι νεότερες αντιλήψεις για την εξέλιξη των κοινωνικών και των οικονομικών θεσμών στο Βυζάντιο", <i>Μνημόσυνο Μανόλη Τριανταφυλλίδη (=Επιστημονική Επετηρίς Φιλοσοφικής Σχολής του Πανεπιστημίου Θεσσαλονίκης 8)</i> , Θεσσαλονίκη 1960, 19-46
	Kitzinger E. , "The Cult of Image in the Age before Iconoclasm", <i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i> , 8, 1954, 83-150
	Liebenschuetz J.H. , "The Finances of Antioch in the 4th c. A.D", <i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift</i> , 52, 344-356
	Liebenschuetz J.H. , <i>Antioch, City and Imperial administration in the later Roman Empire</i> , Oxford university Press, Oxford 1972
	Mazzarino S. , <i>Aspetti sociali del quarto secolo</i> , Roma 1951



	Cameron A., Garnsey P., Hunt D., Word Perkins B., <i>The Cambridge Ancient History. XIII. The Late Empire, A.D. 337-425</i> , Cambridge 1998
	Αθανασιάδη-Fowden Π. , "Ο μέγας αιώνας", <i>Ιστορία του Ελληνικού Έθνους Ζ</i> , Εκδοτική Αθηνών, Αθήνα 1978, 32-91
	Lacombarde C. , "Notes sur l' aurum coronarium", <i>Revue des études anciennes</i> , 1949, 54-59

Webliography :

	Antioch en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antioch#Early_Christian-Byzantine_period
	Homilies on the Statues (Chrysostom) http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1901.htm

Glossary :

	acta The greetings addressed as 'slogans' by the citizens or the soldiers to the officials in meeting places or when the army gathered to be inspected by a senior political figure. When the emperor was greeted, the term was 'acta'.
	bouleuterion Council house. An assembly hall for magistrates or members of the council.
	comes 1. A title in the Roman and the Byzantine Empires, designating an official with political but mostly military jurisdiction. Especially the <i>comes Orientis</i> held the position corresponding to that of a vicar in Early Byzantine period. In the years of Justinian I, the comes in head of wider provinces assumed political and military powers, while in the Middle Byzantine period the Opsikion theme was one of the few themes which was the jurisdiction of a comes instead of a strategos. 2. A nobility title in medieval Europe.
	consularis A Roman title that was given to former consuls. From the 3rd century on, the title was also used for governors of provinces where several legions were assigned.
	curiales Curiales were the members of the city councils (gr.: <i>boule</i>) in the late Roman Empire. They belonged to the local aristocracy and were officials of the municipal administration, responsible for the normal functioning of the city's institutions as well as for local tax-collecting. A city's <i>boule</i> could count from 100 to 200 curiales, depending on the city's population.

Sources

Libanii opera omnia, Förster R., (publ.), (Leipzig – Teubner 1903-1927), XVI, XX, XXII.

Libanius, *Or. 47: De Patrociniiis*, Harmand L. (publ.-trn.) (Paris 1955).

Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca, Migne, J.P. (ed.), (Paris 1857-1866), v. LXXII, col. 614,

Quotations

The violation of the image of the Emperor Theodosius I:

«...βλέψαν τες δὲ εἰς τὰς πολλὰς τὰς ἐν ταῖς σανίσιν εἰκόνας βλασφημίας πρὸ λίθων ἐπ' αὐτὰς ἀφέντες ἐπὶ μὲν ταῖς ὀηγνυμέναις ἐγέλων, πρὸς δὲ τὰς ἀντεχούσας ἠγανάκτουν. ἔπειθ' ἠγούμενοι τὰς ἐν τῷ χαλκῷ τιμιωτέρας καὶ τὴν εἰς ἐκεῖνας παροινίαν ἀφορητοτέραν δραμόντες ἐπ' αὐτὰς ἅμα σχοινίους περιθέντες τοῖς αὐχέσι καταβαλόντες εἴλκον, οἱ μὲν οὐ διατεμόντες, οἱ δὲ καὶ



τοῦτο ποιήσαντες. καίτοι περὶ μὲν τοῦ πατρὸς ἴσως ἂν εἴποιεν τὸ χρυσίον, Ἀρκαδίῳ δὲ τί ἂν τις ἐγκαλέσειε; τῷ δὲ μετ' ἐκείνων τί; τῆ δὲ τούτων μητρὶ; τῷ δὲ τοῦ βασιλέως πατρὶ; περὶ ὧν οὐκ ἔστιν εἰπεῖν, ὡς μετεῖχον τῶν περὶ τὴν φορὰν. παραδόντες τοίνυν τοῖς παιδαρίοις ἐν τοῖς οὕτως αἰδεσίμοις παίζειν ἐχώρουν αὐτοὶ μετὰ πυρὸς ἐπ' οἰκίαν ἀνδρὸς ἀδικοῦντος μὲν οὐ- δέν, δοκοῦντος δὲ τοῖς οὐ βουλομένοις ἀκούειν τῶν γραμμάτων, καὶ τὰ μὲν ἕκασον, ...»

Libanios, *Libanii opera omnia*, publ. Förster R., vv 12 (Leipzig – Teubner 1903-1927), Or. XXII. 8, 9.

Chronological Table

January 387: Theodosius I issues a decree imposing a special levy on the citizens of Antioch.

February 387: The decree is read out before the curiales of Antioch. The Antiocheans complain and resort to violence against the symbols of the imperial power; they set the house of a curialis on fire. The riot is suppressed by the *comes Orientis*, citizens are arrested, stand a trial and get sentenced to death. They are executed and Antioch is deprived of its privileges; the curiales are arrested. The delegates of Theodosius I arrive to make inquiries (Caesarius and Hellebichus); monks and anchorites arrive in the city (Macedonius). The bishop of Antioch Flavian arrives to Constantinople.

13-21 March (?) 387: Caesarius returns to Constantinople

21 March (?) 387: Decision of Theodosius I; amnesty for the Antiocheans, the privileges of the city restored.

after Easter 387: Massive Christianisation of pagan Antiocheans.

Chronological Table

The orator Libanios recounts and explains:

Oration No. 16 'Πρὸς Ἀντιοχεῖς, περὶ τῆς τοῦ βασιλέως ὀργῆς' (as advice to the citizens)

Oration No. 20 'Πρὸς Θεοδοσίον τὸν βασιλέα περὶ τῆς στάσεως' (the reason)

Oration No. 22 'Εἰς Ἑλλέβιχον' (the events)

Libanii opera omnia, publ. Förster R., vv 12 (Leipzig – Teubner 1903-1927), XVI, XX, XXII.