

## Introduction

*Studying Daily Life in the Late Roman Empire*

### WHAT IS LATE ANTIQUITY?

Scholars today study the period between “the end of Rome” and “the beginning of the Middle Ages” as a distinct historical epoch. We call the period “Late Antiquity” or “the late Roman Empire,” and this book uses both phrases interchangeably. Historians debate when Late Antiquity began and ended, but all agree that any periodization is strictly a modern convention. For a number of reasons, this book will focus on the period 250–600 CE. Most would concur that the second half of the third century marked the start of Late Antiquity, mainly because this was a time of unrest as well as major political, economic, and military reforms that came to characterize the period (see next section). Ending Late Antiquity in the year 600 CE is arguably more arbitrary, but it makes some sense. By 600, the western regions of the Roman Empire (Britain, Spain, Gaul, Italy, and North Africa) were largely under the control of post-Roman barbarian governments. While many cultural aspects of the Roman Empire endured within these new post-Roman kingdoms, their political and administrative fragmentation makes it hard to talk about them as a coherent entity. In the Empire’s eastern regions (Egypt, Greece, Asia Minor, and the Near East, e.g., Syria and Palestine), the Roman emperor continued to rule over a single polity into the middle of the seventh century, when invasions by Slavs, Avars, and Arabs led to significant territorial loss. After that, the eastern Roman Empire was reduced to the provinces of Greece and Asia Minor and the capital

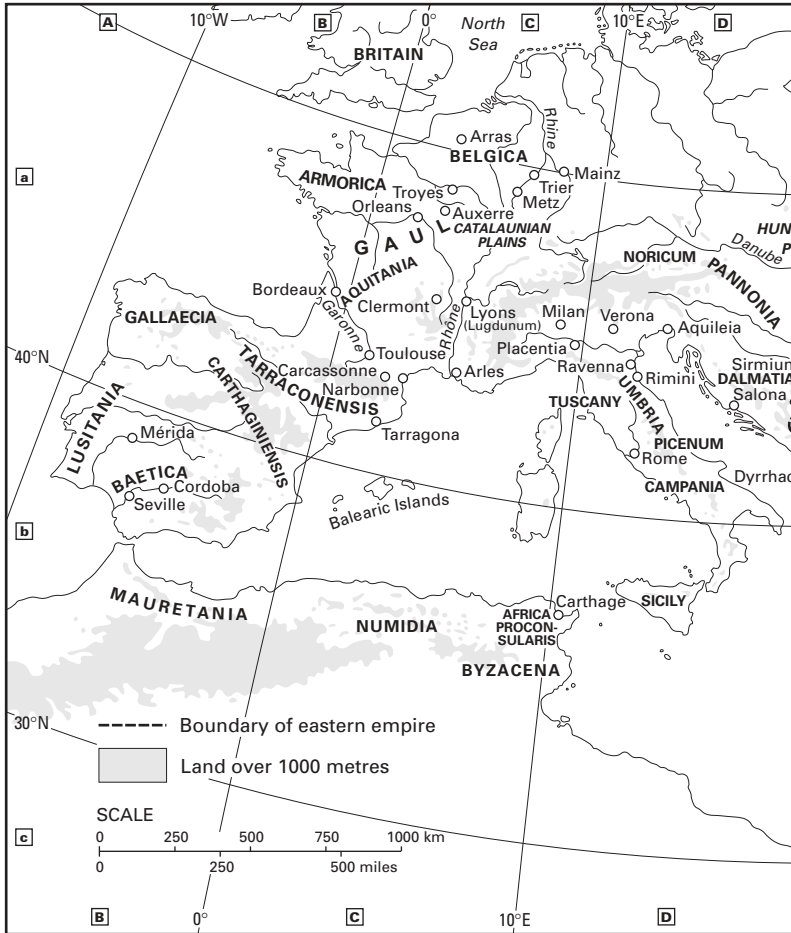


FIGURE 0.1 Map of the late Roman Empire, ca. 400 CE, from *Cambridge Ancient Histories*, vol. 14, p. 16.

city of Constantinople. Moreover, by concluding our study in the year 600 CE, we avoid the challenge of examining daily life during the rise of Islam and the emergence of the Arab caliphate in the seventh century. Islam is a genuine late antique phenomenon that should be studied in relation both to other monotheistic religions of the day (e.g., Christianity and Judaism) and to specific developments in regional politics and social relations in the Arabian peninsula. However, the study of early Islam requires expert knowledge of a very different source base from the one that we use to examine the late



Roman Empire. Imperfect as the year 600 CE may be, one has to end a textbook – and a class – somewhere (Figure 0.1).

#### STUDYING DAILY LIFE IN THE DEEP PAST: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

There are hundreds of books on “daily life” in the past. Since the 1960s, it has been among the most popular genres of historical writing, especially for students and general audiences who want to

know how ordinary people once lived. In fact, German historians in the 1970s coined a term for this particular approach to history, *Alltagsgeschichte*, or “everyday history.” They were especially interested in how regular people lived under the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s, and believed that an understanding of everyday experiences under Nazism would explain the rise of the Third Reich better than conventional political approaches. In fact, this “bottom up” approach to the past was already well under way in the study of Roman history. The French scholar Jérôme Carcopino’s *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, first published in 1941, broke new ground with its distinct focus on housing, social etiquette, leisure activities, and work in the city of Rome during the second century. As Carcopino’s lively study of the everyday makes clear, the quotidian habits of men, women, and children were central to the history of a great imperial state.

Not all historians, however, have always accepted the study of daily life as a legitimate type of history. The approach has been criticized for being essentially descriptive and lacking in analysis (i.e., for only describing how people did something, rather than explaining why they did it); for making too much of seemingly trivial practices or banal objects, such as breastfeeding or children’s toys; and for treating aspects of daily life in a certain time period as if they are unchanging phenomena. Since the 1980s and 1990s, historians have redressed the more relevant criticisms. As a result, the study of daily life has become more analytic in approach, as scholars now typically explain why people behaved and thought the way they did. They also attend to how the everyday changes over time and have come to appreciate the importance of daily life for understanding the impact, scope, and meaning of broad political, social, and cultural developments. Consequently, the study of ordinary people doing ordinary things has become central to how we understand the past.

Studying daily life in the deep past, in a period such as Late Antiquity, brings special challenges, however. First, we have to appreciate the extraordinary fundamental differences that separate modern Western society (among others) from late Roman society. One cannot exaggerate the extent to which electric lighting, fossil fuel-powered engines, modern medical procedures and medicines (especially vaccines), synthetic fertilizer (among other technologies and resources), and social safety nets shape our lives today. Imagine a world where

none of these exist, and you will find yourself in the late Roman Empire, where communication between cities could take weeks or even months; where the average life expectancy at birth was twenty-five years; where everything you ate, wore, or used had to be produced by hand from natural materials; where your primary source of indoor lighting was oil lamps; and where those who had no means were left to die.

Second, there are the problems associated with the ancient sources themselves. Unlike historians who examine daily life in Victorian London, who have access to a vast array of archival sources, scholars of Late Antiquity have few large-scale datasets or more personal accounts by individuals, such as memoirs. For instance, in addition to the absence of standardized death, birth, and baptismal records (beyond what is written on tombstones), there are few late ancient autobiographical writings and no wide-scale publications such as newspapers authored by and/or aimed at a broader section of society. In short, we have few sources that offer direct insight into the emotional and intellectual worlds of ordinary people. In fact, our only significant source of documentary records is Egypt, where the dry climate has preserved hundreds of thousands of papyrus sheets, which were used by individuals to record information about quotidian matters such as taxes, lawsuits, labor arrangements, property matters, and personal communication.

Additionally, many of our best sources for daily life in Late Antiquity are prescriptive, meaning that they denote what behavior *should* look like in an ideal sense, rather than describe how it was really conducted. The sermons of Christian bishops, Talmudic interpretations, imperial law codes, and elite correspondence were not created to help historians in the twenty-first century decipher how regular people lived in Late Antiquity. Also, elite adult men authored most of our extant written documents, and as a result, we do not have easy access to the experiences of non-elites, women, and children.

Despite these challenges, we can use ancient sources with care to derive knowledge about the daily experiences of people from a large cross-section of society. First, historians can “read against the grain,” meaning that we can take into account ideological frameworks that might structure how a particular author presents a topic and look for details that do not directly support that framework. For example, an aristocrat’s account of his rural villa in Gaul and the crudeness of those who labored on it will be oriented around his own

presuppositions about “rustics” and their inherent inferiority to elites. Yet, were this same author to note that a particular rustic could read and write, or that she had connections to families on a neighboring estate – details that seemingly go against the notion that peasants are illiterate, one-dimensional nonentities – then we might seize upon these comments as indicative of how some peasants actually lived, precisely because they are not stereotypical. Second, the fact that women are not well represented in the evidence does not mean that they are not represented at all. We have a relatively large number of papyrus texts from Egypt that were written by, for, or about real women, and these texts help us to correct the inherent patriarchal biases of the majority of our sources.<sup>1</sup> Of course, gender was experienced very differently in Late Antiquity than it is today, and we should not expect that late Roman women had the same desires, choices, and expectations that modern American women do.

Third, scholars of daily life must practice the art of inferential thinking and speculative history. There are many holes in our evidence and a total absence of sources for certain aspects of everyday life. For instance, scholars still do not really know what women did during their menstrual cycles to collect their blood and stay clean. Unsurprisingly, none of our normative, prescriptive sources – including a large number of medical texts – address the practicalities of getting your period in an age before adhesive-strip pads or tampons, or, more to the point perhaps, when most people did not regularly wear underwear. To make up for these missing data, historians of daily life have a few tools in their kit: they can draw inferences (we know that women in Alexandria collected what our texts call *phulakia*, or “protection,” which were probably used menstrual rags, and hence we can infer that women used pads to absorb their menstrual blood and that there was some kind of recycling system); they can use comparative evidence from other premodern societies (in the European Middle Ages, women wore belts with linen or woolen pads during menstruation); and they simply make educated guesses (we know that women sometimes wore underwear for athletic contests, so perhaps they also did when they had their periods, and used it to hold menstrual pads in place). At times in this book, we will also “fill in the blanks” in order to create a cohesive narrative about everyday life, and all readers should understand that such is the nature of the evidence and the interpretive challenge of our subject matter.

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXTS AT A GLANCE

A history of daily life cannot be studied entirely apart from its broader geographical, political, social, and cultural contexts. The goal of this section is to provide readers with a brief introduction to the major changes that took place within the Roman imperial government, society, and religious systems between 250 and 600 CE.

#### Geography, Government, and Administration

In 250 CE, the Roman Empire was governed in much the same way that it had been since the first century CE: as a militarized autocratic polity, ruled by an emperor and his court. The emperor's capital was in Rome, which was the largest, grandest, and most heavily populated city in the Empire. The Senate, a collegial body of largely appointed male officials, still met regularly in Rome and issued decrees of its own. Nevertheless, the rule of law, control of the army, and economic decisions lay in the hands of the imperial court. To govern an empire that stretched from Britain to the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, the emperor relied on governors and a string of lesser officials, who collected taxes, operated the extensive legal system, commanded the armies, and oversaw the general maintenance of law and order in the Empire's many provinces. The province was the basic administrative-geographic unit of the Roman Empire, and there were around fifty provinces in 250 CE. Each province was governed by an appointed official, who was responsible for tax collection and the law courts, which were just as important in maintaining law and order as the army. The Roman army was divided into legions (each approximately 5,200 troops) that were stationed around the Empire, but were especially concentrated along its major frontiers: the southern banks of the Danube River and the western shores of the Rhine; in the far east, where Rome bordered on the Parthian (and later Persian) Empire, the only other superpower; and in Egypt, the primary source of the Empire's grain supply.

The structure of the Roman government, the provincial administration, and the army remained largely unchanged between 250 and 285 CE. All these institutions, however, were placed under considerable pressure, because there was extreme political instability within the imperial court and an increase in predatory attacks by non-Roman armies and war

bands within the Empire. Between 235 and 284 CE, there were at least twenty-six different emperors, most of whom rose to power – and were subsequently removed from it – via assassination and/or military coup. The Roman frontier, which had long been a stable feature of the Empire, began to break down from ca. 240 CE. From 240 to 275 CE, the Roman armies engaged repeatedly with enemy militias originating from just beyond the frontiers. These forces were more interested in raiding and collecting plunder than seizing territory, but their incursions were at times deep within the Empire. One emperor, Decius (r. 249–251 CE), was killed in battle against the Goths, a Germanic-speaking people from north of the Danube. Imperial usurpers in Gaul and Syria also established independent states within the Empire. The emperor Aurelian (r. 270–275 CE) eventually recaptured Gaul and Britain from Tetricus (r. 271–274 CE) and the Palmyrene region in Syria from Zenobia (r. 267–275 CE), whose husband had governed the region since 260 CE. There was also a major pandemic between 250 and 270 CE (the “plague of Cyprian,” which was probably a form of hemorrhagic fever) that fatally impacted communities throughout the Empire.

Rome did not collapse under these conditions. In 284 CE, a new emperor came to power, Diocletian (r. 284–305 CE), who drove some of the most important political and administrative changes in the Empire’s history. His most lasting contribution was to reorganize the way that the Empire was ruled, insisting that a single emperor in Rome was insufficient to deal with the many problems occurring along Rome’s frontiers. He divided the Empire into four administrative quadrants, two overseen by emperors (*augusti*) and two overseen by junior emperors called “Caesars” (*caesares*). Scholars call this new government the tetrarchy, meaning “rule of four.” Diocletian, in other words, decided that Rome was best ruled not by a single man, but by a coalition of rulers, each of whom had responsibility for a particular region, working together as a unit. Diocletian also reckoned that it made better sense for the imperial headquarters to be closer to the frontiers, where unrest was most intense. Consequently, he periodically established new capitals, such as Trier, Milan, Sirmium, and Nicomedia. With the intention of creating a more efficient government, Diocletian redrew provincial boundaries, creating more smaller provinces that were grouped into larger units called dioceses. After his reforms, there were a hundred provinces and twelve dioceses. Henceforth, the size of the Roman imperial administration grew rapidly.



Additionally, Diocletian oversaw a reform of the army, since each quadrant needed a separate force, and attempted to both stem inflation through price fixing and reform the religious environment by requiring individual acts of sacrifice to the imperial gods – an act that was largely targeted at Christians and led to large-scale persecutions. And in order to pay for all these costly reforms, the emperor raised taxes and reorganized the system by which the Empire assessed taxes and collected revenues.

Diocletian's reforms were durable, but they did not continue unchanged. Following his final abdication in 305 CE, the tetrarchy dissolved, and henceforth one or two leaders ruled Rome, not four.<sup>2</sup> For most of its future history, the Empire remained administratively split into two halves, one encompassing the western provinces with a capital first in Milan and then Ravenna, and the other constituting the eastern provinces with a capital in Constantinople, named for the emperor Constantine (r. 312–337 CE), who founded it. Additionally, the Roman army was divided into separate eastern and western organizations, each commanded by a different set and number of high generals.

In this book, we shall use the terms “the West” and “the East” to refer to these two parts of the Empire. Generally speaking, by the West we mean provinces in Britain, Spain, Gaul, Italy, Illyricum (the former Yugoslavia), and North Africa. By the East, we mean Egypt, as well as provinces in Greece, Thrace, Asia Minor (modern Turkey), Syria, and Palestine (including what is now Jordan and Israel). Culturally speaking, more connected East and West than separated them, but the main difference was linguistic: while Latin was the common tongue in the West, Greek along with Egyptian (i.e., Coptic) and several Semitic languages (e.g., Aramaic and later Syriac) were the primary spoken and written languages in the East. Northern non-Roman peoples, discussed more in the next section, spoke a variety of languages, such as Gothic. Although some of these groups became major political powers in the late Roman Empire, their languages only rarely entered the written record.<sup>3</sup> However, we should assume that spoken tongues differed enormously across the Empire.

*Changing Geopolitics: West versus East*

For much of the fourth century, the Empire was prosperous and stable. Beginning in the late fourth century, however, shifting political and

military conditions in the West set off a process of fragmentation, whereby the Roman state ceased to rule large swaths of territory that had previously been within its frontiers. By 410 CE, the army and administration had effectively abandoned Britain, which had been experiencing heavy raiding from Saxon troops. After 406 CE, when bands of Alans, Sueves, and Vandals crossed the Rhine into northern Gaul, attacking cities and towns, the Roman army did little to halt their progress, forcing the region's inhabitants to fend for themselves. While the history of every region is different, virtually all western imperial territories came to be ruled by non-Roman polities over the course of the fifth century: the Franks, Burgundians, and Visigoths in Gaul; the Vandals, first in Spain and then in North Africa; and the Ostrogoths in Italy and southern Gaul. The last reigning western Roman emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed in 476 CE, and from that date forward there was a single Roman emperor and imperial court in Constantinople.<sup>4</sup>

These arrangements in the West remained the status quo until the middle of the sixth century, when the emperor Justinian (r. 527–565 CE) launched a campaign to restore some of the lost western provinces to imperial rule. Although these wars of reconquest (often referred to as the Justinianic Wars) were successful in the short run – by 554 CE, Italy, North Africa, and southern Spain were administratively reintegrated into the Roman Empire – they ultimately could not stem the tide of political fragmentation in the West. By the end of the sixth century, Gaul and Spain were entirely ruled by post-Roman kingdoms (the Franks and Visigoths, respectively), while Italy was further divided into Lombard duchies and imperial-controlled regions. North Africa remained under nominal imperial control until the seventh century, when it fell to Arab armies.

In contrast, the East was ruled by Roman emperors in Constantinople as a coherent whole throughout Late Antiquity. To be sure, there were numerous internal political crises, such as when Phocas led a rebellion that unseated the emperor Maurice in 602 CE. There were also extensive hostilities with Persia (also known as the Sasanian Empire), the other dominant imperial state, which stretched from the eastern shores of the Arabian peninsula to modern Afghanistan and was centered in what are today Iran and Iraq. In fact, throughout the sixth century, Rome was intermittently at war with the Sasanians, who constantly pushed against the frontiers separating the two great empires. As already mentioned, the East underwent a geopolitical fragmentation similar to the West in the later seventh and eighth