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978-1-107-01162-5 - Constructing Communities in the Late Roman Countryside
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CONSTRUCTING COMMUNITIES IN THE LATE ROMAN COUNTRYSIDE

This book is the first comprehensive treatment of the "small politics" of rural communities in the Late Roman world. It places the diverse fates of those communities within a generalized model for exploring rural social systems. Fundamentally, social interactions in rural contexts in the period revolved around the desire of individual households to insure themselves against catastrophic subsistence failure, and the need of the communities in which they lived to manage the attendant social tensions, inequalities, and conflicts. A focus upon the politics of reputation in those communities provides a striking contrast to the picture painted by the legislation and the writings of Rome's literate elite: when viewed from the point of view of the peasantry, issues such as the Christianization of the countryside, the emergence of new types of patronage relations, and the effects of the new system of taxation upon rural social structures take on a different aspect.

CAM GREY is Assistant Professor in the Department of Classical Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, where his research covers the social and economic history of the later Roman Empire. He is also a co-director of the Roman Peasant Project, an archaeological project located in southern Tuscany that amounts to the first systematic, interdisciplinary attempt to analyze the houses, farms, and lived experiences of the Roman peasantry.

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Preface

Intuitively, we feel we know what a community is, even if we often find it hard to identify the precise characteristics that define it. The term evokes notions of common interest and regular interaction, shared identity and interdependence. Romantically, we might conjure up visions of picket fences and carefully swept streets, block parties and cookouts. More prosaically, we may think of neighborhoods and church committees, university campuses and online gaming forums. In each case, the fundamental ideas are the same: A community is simultaneously a sustaining social milieu for the individuals who belong to it, and a complex collection of obligations and expectations that those individuals must continue to meet in order to remain members. Membership confers the privilege of scrutinizing the claims of others to belong, but also opens one up to the same process of scrutiny. These complementary, potentially contradictory considerations underpin our experience of community on an everyday basis today, and we should expect them to have underpinned the everyday lives of the inhabitants of the ancient world as well.

Communities in the late Roman world are not hard to find. We observe (to take merely a few examples) communities of aristocrats, sometimes spread over considerable distances, sustained by the exchange of letters, literary trifles, and the produce of their estates; communities of barbarian *foederati*, settled in a variety of ways and on a multiplicity of terms within the boundaries of the empire; civic communities, experiencing transformations in their physical and ideological composition as they come to reflect Christian, rather than pagan, values and sensibilities; religious communities, which might come to blows with one another over matters of doctrine or interpretation of Scripture; and monastic communities from the deserts of Egypt to the mountains of eastern Gaul. It does not seem a stretch to assume that there were communities of agriculturalists in the countrysides of the Mediterranean world in the period as well, but the quotidian rhythms of those communities, the principles, expectations, and practices that

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sustained them across the breadth of that world, have not to date been the subject of a stand-alone study.

This book is aimed at filling that gap. In the process, it seeks to reconnect the agrarian history of the ancient Mediterranean world with agrarian histories of other periods and other regions. I do this on the assumption that all parties might have useful insights to offer each other on questions of common interest, and with the intention of exploring certain problems that have become politically or philosophically fraught in contemporary contexts. Many of these problems congregate around the emergence of a globalized economy, resting principally upon the economic principles of capitalism, and largely dominated by the most politically and economically powerful nations. But, at base, they rest upon realities that are little different from phenomena that we can observe in the late Roman world.

The late Roman empire was, fundamentally, a diverse collection of culturally, politically, and socio-economically unique communities linked together by bonds of interdependence that were sustained in large part by a collective fiction of unity and common purpose. That collective fiction was subjected to a congeries of pressures over the course of the fourth and fifth centuries: military reversals and political turmoil, religious and philosophical transformations, economic downturns and fiscal crises. The world that emerged from those pressures was both unmistakably different from what had gone before, and characterized by deep and enduring continuities with the past. This coincidence of fundamental changes and equally fundamental continuities has been the subject of much scholarly debate in recent years, and those debates do not need to be rehearsed here. But it is worth making explicit the coincidences between the concerns of contemporary scholarship on the transformation of the ancient Mediterranean world, and contemporary concerns with the transformation of our own world. I do so not in order to trumpet the relevance or timeliness of the present work, but merely to acknowledge the extent to which it reflects its social, cultural, and intellectual context.

The "small worlds" of the agriculturalists who are the focus of this book encompassed complex, complementary collections of communities, which orbited around satisfying the subsistence and social needs of their households and families. In the writing of this book, I have found myself in a similar situation, and I wish to acknowledge each of my communities in turn. The University of Pennsylvania has provided financial and institutional support over the course of this project, and in addition I have been fortunate to receive grants and fellowships from the Loeb Classical Library Foundation; the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies; and

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the Penn Humanities Forum. The students in my undergraduate course on marginal populations in the Roman world provided a particularly fertile forum for exploring ideas at a crucial time in the creation of the manuscript. I am grateful also to the participants in a seminar on the management of risk at the American Philological Association's Annual Meeting in Philadelphia in 2009.

These communities of scholars have collectively commented upon, criticized, and helped refine the arguments and propositions presented here, although they should not be held responsible for any inconsistencies or infelicities that remain. Chris Wickham and the late Dick Whittaker submitted the doctoral dissertation that bears only passing resemblance to the present document to a searching examination, and I am grateful to them for their generosity in doing so. In addition, I thank the anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press, whose comments and responses have led to revisions that, I hope, have improved the manuscript in fundamental ways. Michael Sharp, my editor at the Press, has displayed patience and friendship over the long period of time that has elapsed between the promise and the completion of this project.

The members of the academic community of the University of Pennsylvania have served as a constant reminder of the ways that different communities can intermingle: my colleagues in the Department of Classical Studies and elsewhere at Penn are not only a challenging and stimulating community of scholars, but also a collection of friends and quasi-kin. The "village" that they represent has enriched me in countless ways, both intellectually and personally. I thank also the friends who have given of their time, expertise, and knowledge to read and discuss the manuscript in its various forms: Kim Bowes, Ari Bryen, Nate Roberts, and Steve Rowe. They know that, by acknowledging my debt to them here I anticipate future opportunities to repay that debt, although I know that the balance will always remain unequal.

Peter Garnsey, who supervised the doctoral dissertation at the University of Cambridge out of which this book has grown, has been a source of wit and affection, wisdom and intellectual rigor in equal measure over more than a decade. I acknowledge with pleasure and gratitude his friendship and guidance. I also remember with the most profound respect and fondness John Crook, who guided me through both the intricacies of Roman law and Cambridge's better eateries. I am grateful for the home-away-from-home that I have in Fort Smith, Arkansas, together with all the members of that household. While my own parents and brothers have long been geographically far removed, they have remained a constant, constantly supportive

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presence throughout the completion of this project. Finally, and most importantly, it is my family that sits at the center of my social network, just as it did for the peasants and *rustici* of the late Roman world. And so, I offer this book to Ann, and to Isabel. They are not merely my small world. They are my whole world.

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List of abbreviations

Papyrological sources are abbreviated in accordance with:

Oates, J. F., Bagnall, R. S., Willis, W. H. and Worp, K. A. (1992), *Checklist of Editions of Greek and Latin Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets*, 4th edn., Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists, Supplement 7.

Epigraphical sources are abbreviated in accordance with:

Bérard, F., Feissel, D., Petitmengin, P. and Sère, M. (2000), *Guide de l'épigraphiste: bibliographie choisie des épigraphies antiques et médiévales*, 3rd edn., Paris.

Full references to *corpora* of papyri and inscriptions may be found in these editions.

Journal titles are abbreviated following *L'Année philologique*.

Rabbinic sources have been abbreviated in accordance with:

Strack, H. L. and Stemberger, G. (1996), *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 2nd edn., ed. and trans. M. Bockmuehl, Minneapolis, 374–5.

Citation of other collections and texts follows or is modeled upon:

Jones, A. H. M. (1964), *The Later Roman Empire*, Oxford vol. II, 1464–76.

Where other citations are abbreviated, currently accepted standard practices have been observed. Where no standard practice exists, abbreviations and citation practices are signaled in the citation of the text in the Bibliography. Where multiple editions exist, the text used here is specified.

In addition, the following abbreviations have been adopted:

CoptEncyc = Atiya, A. S., ed. (1991), *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, 8 vols., New York.

PLRE I = Jones, A. H. M., Martindale, J. R. and Morris, J. (1971), *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire, Volume I AD 260–395*, Cambridge.

PLRE II = Martindale, J. R. (1980), *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire, Volume II AD 395–527*, Cambridge.

PO = *Patrologia Orientalis*, Paris. References to works in this series will be by author, text, then page number of the relevant volume.

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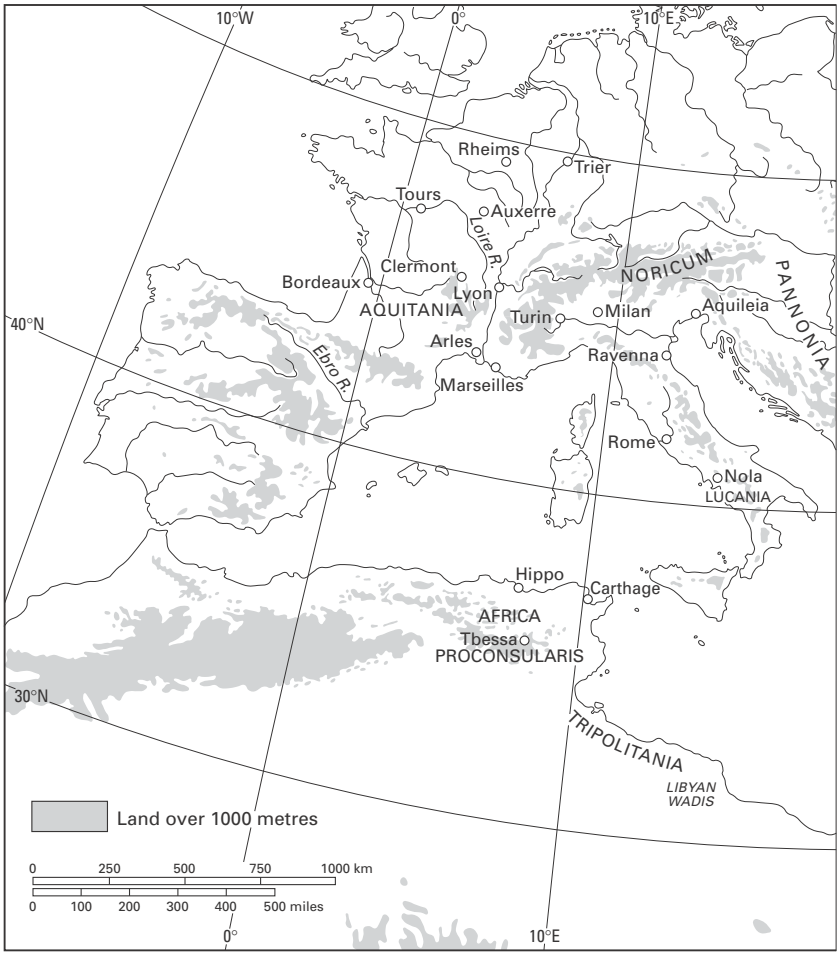

Map: The late Roman world (sites and regions discussed in the text).

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