

Approaches to the Fate of the Late Antique City

Experience is not what happens to a man; it's what a man does with what happens to him.

—Aldous Huxley¹

My heart is moved by all I cannot save
 So much has been destroyed
 I have to cast my lot with those, who, age after age,
 Perversely, with no extraordinary
 Power, reconstitute the world.

—Adrienne Rich, Excerpt from *Natural Resources*.²

This book is about what generations of men and women experienced and did in the wake of political and military crises that overtook the city of Rome from the late third through the early seventh centuries. Rome was still the largest city in the western Mediterranean and an imperial capital, with a resident aristocracy and prestigious institutions that had enabled Romans to rule an empire since the third century BCE. The five political and military crises that I analyze are the ones that historians have considered critical for understanding the “decline and fall of Rome.” By focusing on how these crises led Romans to act to rebuild their city, I offer an alternative perspective for understanding the last three centuries of the western Roman Empire, its imperial city, and its senatorial aristocracy. Although the fortunes of Rome’s leaders – senators, emperors, generals, and bishops – ebbed and flowed in a city which suffered population loss and reduced resources, the senatorial aristocracy remained at the center of the city’s recovery. The resilience of Roman senatorial aristocrats who, time and again, used their resources to fuel the city’s resurgence in the midst of loss, is significant and moving.

¹ Huxley 1933, p. 5. ² Rich 1978, p. 67.

Yet the resilience and power of Roman senatorial aristocrats in relation to other elites is often understated by those who write the history of the city in the final centuries of the western Roman Empire. I begin with a paradigmatic example of that oversight which is also relevant to Rome's most important physical defense – the wall that encircled the city built under the emperor Aurelian (270–75) for a barbarian invasion that never happened. Soon enough, in the coming centuries, Rome would be under attack and Aurelian's Wall, along with his reorganization of the city's food supply, were critical to the city's survival. But the wall and the food supply are also emblematic of how Romans were able to restore the city after each military and political crisis.

Waiting for the Barbarians: Aurelian's Wall and the Defense of Rome

Since all that [had] happened [the war with various Germanic tribes] made it seem possible that some such thing might occur again, as had happened under Gallienus, after asking advice from the Senate, he [Aurelian] extended the walls of the city of Rome.³

In the uncertain times of the late third century, Italy faced a series of invaders. In 259, Germans had penetrated as far south as the city of Rome. The Senate, with the emperor and military away, armed soldiers and citizens to ward off the attack.⁴ In 270, the Iuthungi invaded northern Italy. The newly acclaimed emperor, Aurelian, defeated them in autumn of 270 and then fought the Vandals. But the Iuthungi returned to Italy and surprised Aurelian in a wood near Placentia (modern Piacenza), where the emperor faced a disastrous rout.⁵ The news of his defeat spread terror, especially since the inhabitants of Rome remembered the all-too-recent attack on their city under the emperor Gallienus (253–68), as noted in the epigraph at the

³ *Hist. Aug. Aur.* 21.9: trans. Magie, vol. 3, pp. 235–37: *His actis cum videret posse fieri ut aliquod tale iterum, quale sub Gallieno evenerat, proveniret, adhibito consilio senatus muros Urbis Romae dilatavit.* Cf. *Hist. Aug. Aur.* 39.2: *muros Urbis Romae sic ampliavit, ut quinquaginta prope milia murorum eius ambitus teneant.* (“He so extended the wall of the city of Rome that its circuit was nearly fifty miles long.”) The actual wall was only twelve miles long, so either the word *milia* refers to 50,000 feet, not miles, or this is a gross exaggeration.

⁴ Zos. 1.37.2 specifies the Senate at Rome: ἡ γερουσία. See too Zonaras 12.24.

⁵ Aurelian's defeat in 270 is noted by the *Hist. Aug. Aur.* 18.3; 21.1–3; *Aur. Vict. Epit.* 35.2; Zos. 1.37.1–2. The *Hist. Aug. Aur.* 18.3–.4 refers to wars with the Marcomanni. Zos. 1.49.1 identified the Germans whom Aurelian confronted in Italy as Alamanni, but they were accompanied by their neighbors, identified correctly as Iuthungi by Dexippus *Frag.* 6 [Jacoby]. See too Potter 2004, pp. 269–70; Paschoud, 1996, pp. 118–20 and on Zosimus, Paschoud 2003, pp. 168–69.

beginning of this section.⁶ The Iuthungi made their way as far south as Umbria before being defeated there and again near Ticinum (modern Pavia). The proximity of the enemy led to rioting in the streets.⁷ The Senate tried to restore calm. According to the unverified account in the anonymous fourth-century *Augustan History*, some senators turned to the famous Sibylline Books, the set of oracles in Greek verse that were consulted on how to avert the anger of the gods in a crisis. If this account is true – an issue that scholars still debate because of the unreliability of the *Augustan History* – the Senate undertook ceremonies of purification on behalf of the populace.⁸

When the victorious Aurelian entered Rome in 271, he found a city in open revolt. The mint workers, fearful of reprisals for their manipulation of the currency, took up arms against him. Some senators supported their revolt in what the author of the *Augustan History*, the fourth-century historian Aurelius Victor, and the early sixth-century historian Zosimus allege was a plot against the emperor by those senators unhappy that the army had chosen Aurelian as ruler and perhaps concerned that they would be implicated in the currency manipulation.⁹ Fighting between Roman soldiers and the rebels broke out in the city. The mint workers and their supporters retreated to the Caelian Hill in Rome, where in the struggle that followed, thousands of Aurelian's soldiers died in hand-to-hand combat.¹⁰ Aurelian had faced insurrections before, and perhaps now he repeated what would become a signature claim for the legitimation of his regime, that “God had

⁶ See note 3 above and *Hist. Aug. Aur.* 18.4: *In illo autem timore, quo Marcomanni cuncta vastabant, ingentes Romae seditiones motae sunt paventibus cunctis, ne eadem quae sub Gallieno fuerant provenirent.* For confusion about the Marcomanni, see note 5 above.

⁷ *Aur. Vict. De Caes.* 35.2; *Epit. de Caes.* 35.2 and *Zos.* 1.49.1 and Paschoud 1971, vol. 1, p. 163. For the rebellion in Rome, see *Zos.* 1.49.1–2; *Hist. Aug. Aur.* 18.4–6; 20.3; 21.5–6; 38.2–4; *Aur. Vict. De Caes.* 35.6; *Eutrop. Brev.* 9.14 and commentary by Paschoud 1996, pp. 118–20.

⁸ For the consultation of the Sibylline books and the Senate's religious response with the celebration of the *ambarvalia* and *amburbium*, the sole narrative is *Hist. Aug. Aur.* 18.4–6; 20.3–8. Although Aurelian's letter berating the Senate's belated response is fictional and we cannot be certain that the purificatory rites were practiced, it is plausible that the Senate consulted the Sibylline Books now, as they had under the previous emperor Claudius II (268–70); see *Aur. Vict. Caes.* 34.3; and the *Epit. de Caes.* 34.3. For this account, see Paschoud 1996, vol. 5.1, pp. 121–23.

⁹ For the mintworkers' rebellion and the senators involved, see *Hist. Aug. Aur.* 21.5 and 38.2–4; *Aur. Vict. De Caes.* 35.6; and *Zos.* 1.49.2, ed. Paschoud 2003, who, on pp. 168–69, includes the names of the senators later executed as Septimius, Urbanus, and Domitian. We know little about these men. See Watson 1999, pp. 52–53, on the complicity of the senators; Dey 2011, p. 112. On the mintworkers, Turcan (1969), pp. 948–59.

¹⁰ *Aur. Vict. De Caes.* 35.6 cites 7,000 soldiers killed, as does *Hist. Aug. Aur.* 38.2. Malalas, *Chron.* 12, incorrectly identifies this revolt as taking place in Antioch. Doubts about the number of men killed are expressed by Dey 2011, p. 112, note 7.

given him the purple,” for he had been “born to rule.”¹¹ Aurelian’s seasoned troops quashed the revolt. The insurgents were executed as well as some senators who had supported them.¹² Some later sources recalled this move as a vindictive act against senators motivated by the new emperor’s need for money, but it was also a stark reminder that it was better to cooperate than to rebel.¹³

Although in 271 Rome had not fallen to the Germanic Iuthungi, the inhabitants along with their new emperor faced the task of rebuilding the city along with their relationship. They did so with remarkable speed and resourcefulness. The most visible sign of this act of restoration of the city, noticeable even to a visitor to Rome today, is the construction of a city wall, the first since the fourth century BCE. Aurelian’s Wall extended for twelve miles, reaching eight meters high and 3.5 meters thick, and was reinforced at intervals of 100 Roman feet (29.6 meters) with square towers.¹⁴ The Wall was clearly intended for defense, and it quickly took on a number of other functions such as tax collection. But I want to underscore how much Aurelian’s Wall quickly redefined the city and the relationships of its inhabitants to it and to one another. As Robert Coates-Stephens aptly observed based on an archaeological case study of the Sessorium Palace in Rome (see Map 2), construction in this region now took place within the confines of Aurelian’s Wall, and there is no evidence of continued civic building outside the wall.¹⁵ Only burial sites with churches were the kinds of communal structures that we find outside the walls in the coming centuries.

The Wall concentrated human interactions within newly established confines, and developed new relations beginning with its very construction. Building the Wall required not only imperial financing but also the support of a large number of the city’s inhabitants. The Senate, which had been responsible for the protection of the city a decade earlier, would have supported this fortification to protect its members and

¹¹ *FHG* 4.197, ed. Müller at 10.6 in Latin reads: *Aurelianus seditione militari aliquando appetitus dixit falli milites, qui regum fata in sua se potestate habere putarent. Quippe deum, qui dator sit purpurae (quam utique dextera praetendebat), etiam annos regni definire*. Although we cannot date this military insurrection, the notion that Aurelian was chosen by the gods and hence born to rule emerges from his coins and inscriptions more widely; see especially Wienand 2015, pp. 63–99.

¹² *Hist. Aug. Aur.* 38.2–4; *Aur. Vict. De Caes.* 35.6; *Zos.* 1.49.2; and *Malalas, Chron.* 12.

¹³ *Amm. Marc.* 30.8.8 underscores the tradition that this was motivated by money, as does the *Hist. Aug. Aur.* 21.5–9.

¹⁴ Dimensions from Dey 2011, p. 19.

¹⁵ Coates-Stephens 2012, pp. 83–110. For its impact on trade, see Malmberg 2015, pp. 196–98.

their homes.¹⁶ Senatorial aristocrats would also have seen the advantage of a public works project that, as Hendrik Dey observed, served to “divert the energies of the masses away from more destructive avenues” by employing several thousand workers.¹⁷ Building the Wall was a mutually beneficial decision that simultaneously restored Rome’s security, boosted relations between Aurelian and the city’s inhabitants, and defined how residents interacted with one another.

Aurelian’s reorganization of the food supply of the city also promoted good relations with the city’s residents. Since the late republic, a number of citizens living in Rome had been granted the right, chosen by lot, of free grain. In the early empire these recipients, male adult citizens, numbered between approximately 160,000 and 180,000. They received tickets (*tesserae frumentariae*) that they and then later their heirs exchanged for monthly rations at the *Porticus Minucia Frumentaria* in the Campus Martius in Rome (see Map 2).¹⁸ Since the recipients of the grain dole are estimated to have made up between one-fifth and one-quarter of the city’s population, this public dole could not have fed the entire city, which in the first century CE is widely estimated to have reached between 700,000 and 1,000,000 inhabitants and to have continued at roughly that size into the fourth century.¹⁹ Although the rest of Rome’s inhabitants bought their grain on the private market, state-subsidized grain stabilized food prices for the residents of Rome. This reduced the potential for food shortages and rioting while also demonstrating the state’s generosity. Aurelian’s efforts at improving the food supply thus won him popularity while at the same time gaining greater control over suppliers and administrators. Changes in the system benefitted some of the new corporations such as the bakers, for now Aurelian distributed free bread instead of grain. Under his rule a decentralized system for the bread’s distribution occurred in a variety of locations (steps or banks) across

¹⁶ *Hist. Aug. Aur.* 21.9, a not entirely reliable source, underscored that Aurelian’s construction occurred after his having consulted with the Senate (*adhibito consilio senatus*). For the building of the wall, see also *Aur. Vict. Epit.* 35.7–9. Although the actual construction of the wall negatively affected some private estates, as can be documented, for example, for the Esquiline Hill gardens, the advantages to the propertied classes must have outweighed the concerns of those few. We do not know if the owners of affected estates were compensated for their losses.

¹⁷ Dey 2011, p. 113. ¹⁸ For the grain dole and its recipients, see Virlouvet 1995 and 2000.

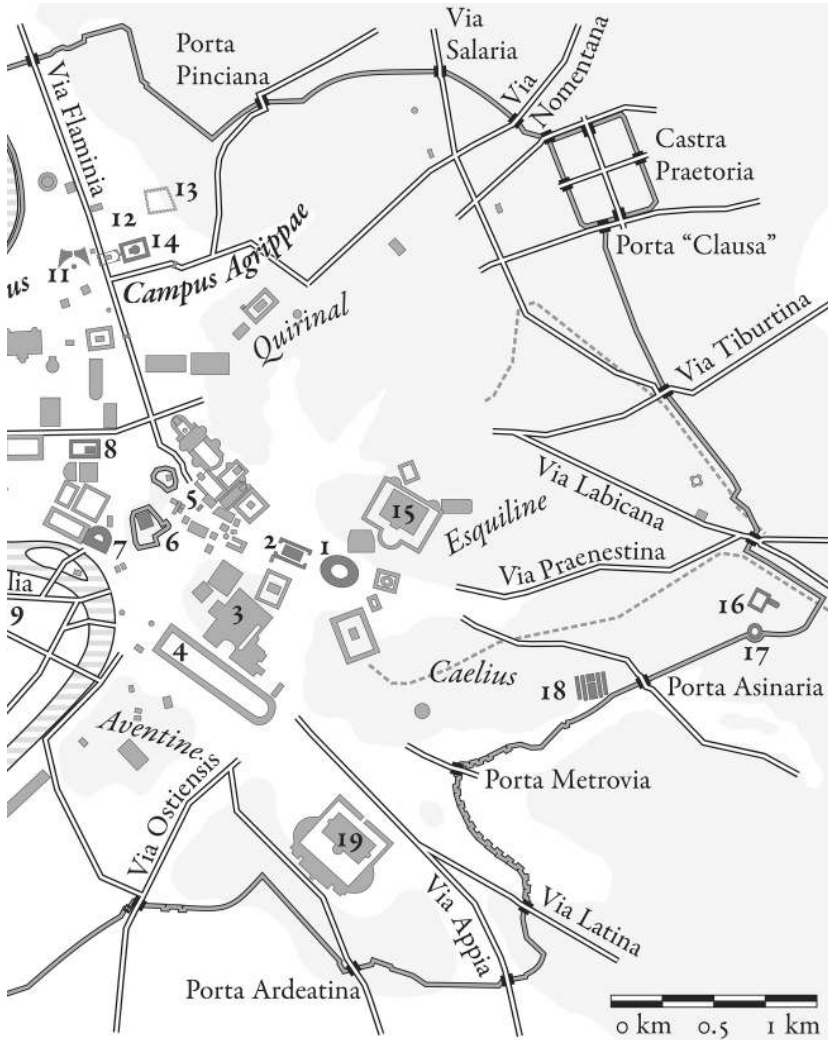
¹⁹ Estimates about the size of the population are based on the grain dole. See Lo Cascio 2000, pp. 57–59, and Lo Cascio 1999, pp. 178–82 for estimates of 650,000–700,000. For the assumption that the grain supply and hence the population was relatively stable into the fourth century, see Vaccaro 2013, pp. 262–65, and Virlouvet 2000, p. 103 with bibliography. These numbers are widely but not uniformly accepted. For a succinct discussion of population estimates, see Morley 2013, pp. 29–44, and Sessa 2018, p. 54.



Map 2 Rome in 275.

the city. This also facilitated crowd control. Finally, Aurelian added free pork for those on the dole and sold wine at subsidized prices to the population at large.²⁰

²⁰ For Aurelian's reorganization, see *Hist. Aug. Aur.* 48.1; *Aur. Vict. Caes.* 35.7; and *Chronographus a.* 354, ed Mommsen, 1892, MGH AA 9, p. 148. For the "steps" or banks, see *Th. Cod.* 14.17.2, 364 CE, and 14.17.3, 368 CE. It seems unlikely that the bread and pork were provided for the entire population. On this see too Machado 2019, pp. 45–61.



Map 2 (cont.)

The administration of this restructured and expanded food dole fell to a large degree upon Roman senatorial aristocrats, whose oversight of aspects of the supply system opened up exceptional avenues for their own economic and political gain. This reorganization resulted in a consolidation of power among the praetorian prefects, the provincial governors, and the urban prefects of Rome, all of whom were senators whose appointments were

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approved by the emperor.²¹ But the urban prefect was the key official in Rome held responsible for the food supply. When the price of wine was too high or the grain ships did not arrive on time in Rome's port, he faced murderously angry crowds who could burn down his home or do real bodily harm.²² Despite these potential dangers, senatorial involvement in this reorganized system offered unmatched opportunities to augment their wealth and political prestige. Dedicatory inscriptions survive that underscore the patron–client networks that developed between urban prefects and the guilds of Rome's food suppliers, such as the bakers, pork suppliers, and wholesale dealers.²³ These ties offered real financial rewards as well since senatorial urban prefects were often also the owners of estates in Italy and North Africa that supplied the grain, pork, and wine for the city, either to the private markets or to the state.²⁴

Aurelian also strove to secure the loyalty of senators through his religious patronage. Aurelian attributed his success to a deity associated with military victory, *Sol Invictus* (The Unconquered Sun), for whom he built a new and magnificent temple in the Campus Agrippae (where he also conveniently stored the wine that he now distributed at reduced prices).²⁵ Once more, senators took a leading role, accepting appointments as *pontifices Solis*.²⁶

²¹ Machado 2019, pp. 30–61.

²² The urban prefect was blamed for famines or food or wine shortages; see Amm. Marc. 14.6.1; and 19.10.1–4 for the prefect Tertullus who during a food shortage in 359 calmed the angry crowd by showing his young boys; see Cracco Ruggini 1961, pp. 152–76 for a full list of food shortages. In 409, a hungry mob murdered the urban prefect, Pompeianus 2, *PLRE* 2, p. 897–98.

²³ Honorary inscriptions of corporations to the twice urban prefect, L. Aradius Valerius Proculus and the urban prefect Attius Insteius Tertullus survive; see *CIL* 6.1690, *CIL* 6.1692, and *CIL* 6.1693. For the career of Proculus, see Salzman and Roberts 2015, p. 16 on Symm. *Ep.* 1.3.4 and Populonium 11, *PLRE* 1, pp. 747–49, urban prefect 337–38 and 351–52. For Attius Insteius Tertullus, urban prefect in 307–08, see Tertullus 6, *PLRE* 1, pp. 883–84. For more on these networks, see Machado 2019, p. 47 especially.

²⁴ For more on the ties between private sales and the food supply, see Vaccaro 2013, pp. 262–65 with bibliography. See too my discussion in Chapters 2 and 3. For the estates of senators in Italy and Southern Italy, see Vera 2005, pp. 26–30; for Sicily, see Vaccaro 2013, pp. 265–72; in North Africa, see Salzman 2002, pp. 93–96 for the fourth century and Conant 2012, pp. 135–42, for Romano-African estate owners who flourished into the fifth-century Vandal period.

²⁵ The Temple of *Sol* is well attested: see *Chron* of 354, ed. Mommsen 1892, 1981 rept., p. 148: *templum Solis et castra in campo Agrippae dedicavit [Aurelian]*; Aur. Vict. 35.7: *His tot tantisque prospere gestis fanum Romae Soli magnificum constituit donariis ornans opulenti*; *Hist. Aug. Aur.* 25.6: *templum Solis fundavit*; 48.4: *in porticibus templi Solis fiscalia vina ponuntur*. See *LTUR* s.v. *Sol, Templum*, pp. 331–32 and Salzman 2020A, pp. 149–67, for its identification as the Temple of *Sol Invictus*.

²⁶ So, for example, he appointed the senator Iunius Gallienus, *CIL* 14.2082, from Lavinium (Latium), as *pontifex dei Solis invicti*. See Rüpke 2008, 65, p. 386; Salzman 2020A, pp. 149–67; and more broadly, Hijmans 2010, pp. 381–427.

Under Aurelian and afterward, the new priestly college of *Sol Invictus* and the new solar temple to this deity became a focus of senatorial aristocratic activity. As one more sign of his outreach, Aurelian chose a western senatorial aristocrat to share the consulship with him in 271 and allowed two others to hold the office in 272.²⁷ The consulship was still the highest magistracy in the empire, although this still-prestigious honor, bestowed by the emperor, had lost any real political or military function. Its recipients, however, gained significant prestige and influence.²⁸

Given the ways in which Aurelian restored his ties to Rome and its senatorial aristocracy, it is not surprising that Aurelian or his supporters could find no better reward for his defeated enemy Tetricus than to make him a senator, and some later accounts claim that he married the vanquished queen Zenobia to a Roman senator.²⁹ For his respect for senators as well as his critical role in the fortification of the city, Aurelian was remembered with some admiration by the pro-senatorial fourth-century author of the *Augustan History* despite his harsh repression of the insurgents who had greeted his arrival in the city at the beginning of his regime.³⁰

We should also appreciate how Roman elites – senators and the military in the urban cohorts – along with non-elites, worked with Aurelian to restore the city. Aurelian offered incentives, material – wall, temple, food – and metaphysical – honor and priesthoods – to support an emperor who was divinely legitimated as one “born to rule.” Senators seized upon these new opportunities for honor and office, undertaking civic patronage roles along with making real economic gains. Religion was especially relevant for this relationship. The emperor, elites, and non-elites used religion to create a new “topography of devotion” for *Sol Invictus* in the city.³¹

Yet the resilience of Roman senators at this critical juncture and the building of a wall with long-term implications for the survival of the city have not received enough attention. This situation is due, in part, to the brevity of Aurelian’s reign, less than five years. But it also is true because the

²⁷ Potter 2004, pp. 265 and 270.

²⁸ For the consulship in late antiquity, see Bagnall, Cameron, Schwartz, and Worp 1987, pp. 1–6.

²⁹ For Tetricus receiving senatorial status and an office after his surrender, see *Aur. Vict.* 35.5; *Eutr. Brev.* 9.13. *Hist. Aug. Aurelian* 39.1 claims he held the office of *corrector Lucaniae*, while the *Hist. Aug. Tyr. Trig.* 24.5 says that Tetricus received the office of *corrector totius Italiae*. Doubts about the veracity of this account as the result of Aurelian propaganda do not diminish the fact that senatorial status was offered as a means of bribing this rebel emperor. For Zenobia wed to a Roman senator, see *Zon.* 12.27 [607], ed. Banchich and Lane, 2009, p. 60.

³⁰ *Hist. Aug. Aur.* 42.4 notes that he was deified; and 50.5: *populus eum Romanus amavit, senatus et timuit.*

³¹ “Topography of devotion” is a phrase used by Moralee 2018, p. 42.

resurgence of Rome even before Constantine does not fit easily into narratives of “decline and fall.” Nor do many modern historians fully appreciate that the city of Rome remained central to the material and political survival of the Roman Empire. That is where this book begins, for newer work on the city of Rome requires rethinking its position in the Mediterranean in late antiquity.

The Influence of the City of Rome on Its Mediterranean Empire

This book focuses on the city of Rome and not on a subset of cities or on the western Roman Empire writ large because the city’s influence had shaped the outlines of its Mediterranean empire. The city of Rome was a nexus of political, cultural, and social networks that the Romans had developed to assert their control of the Mediterranean. Importantly, the “city” – as Rome was called – remained into late antiquity, in the words of Robert Markus, “the head, centre and sum of the world; the world was only the expanded version of the city.”³² This equivalency was possible because, as Lucy Grig trenchantly observed:

Where “Roma” is involved there is always a certain ambivalence: Rome is not just an *urbs* [city], even the *urbs* ([the city,] as she was for so many of her inhabitants): there is always slippage between the city and the idea, *urbs* and *imperium*, *urbs* and *orbis*. The city of Rome was both symbol and society, material and immaterial, its topography both symbolically redolent and endlessly polyvalent.³³

This situation was also true in late antiquity. Aurelian’s Wall was both a material and immaterial statement of the city’s centrality as an urban as well as a Mediterranean-wide imperial hub into the late Roman period down through the late sixth century CE.

The city of Rome continued to exercise a centripetal attraction for elites and non-elites alike. In large part because of Rome’s role as the capital of the empire, “the ruling elite invested the spoils of imperialism in the urban environment, and migrants flocked to service their needs and gain a share of the empire’s wealth; but the elite made this investment precisely because of the importance of the city in establishing and maintaining their power. Rome’s greatness was itself a crucial element of the ideology that sustained Roman rule.”³⁴ The migration of men and women to Rome that replenished the city’s population provided labor for the building projects that elites and the state initiated. The city – with its monuments and topography, its “free

³² Markus 1970, p. 26. ³³ Grig 2012, p. 127. ³⁴ Morley 2013, p. 29.