CHAPTER 1

Introduction
Popular Culture and the Study of (Late) Ancient History

> The most penetrating imagination, with the fullest learning, could never wake to life that dim, sunken mass who dragged out their lives in indigence, with no hope, and probably no desire, of any change.
>
> Samuel Dill, *Roman Society in Gaul in the Merovingian Age* (London, 1926), p. 235

How can we understand the transformations that took place in late antiquity? How did the complex processes of social, economic, cultural and religious change interrelate? Can we understand these processes as activated from the bottom up, as well as top down, and how did these divergent forces interact? This book sets out to examine these questions, focusing on one specific geographical area, southern Gaul, in particular the city of Arles and its late antique ecclesiastical *territorium*, the area associated with Roman Narbonensis, hence largely but not exclusively modern Provence (see Maps 1 and 2). It covers a period of roughly 150 years, from c. 400–550, one of striking political, religious, social and economic change. Although the original impetus for the project came from reading the striking sermons of Caesarius, bishop of Arles from 502 to 542, the main focus is not Caesarius himself: my aim is to look at the period through the lens of popular culture, undergoing its own transformation in late antiquity.[1]

Why popular culture? First because although popular culture has been studied by historians of other periods and cultures, ancient and late ancient historians have been slow off the mark and there is thus a whole fascinating area of study open for new research and analysis. Secondly, as I shall show, during late antiquity popular culture was problematized and targeted by the church as never before and thus we have at our disposal a number of sources from which we can examine both popular culture and its

[1] I was led to Caesarius by Horsfall 2003: 14–17; my debt to Klingshirn 1994 is also clearly visible in what follows.

transformation. Finally, because the study of popular culture, its definition and development in late antiquity, provides an important means of examining the interrelated processes of social, economic, cultural and religious change in late antiquity. As I shall go on to demonstrate, 'popular culture' provides both a substantive area of study (under the rubric of 'popular culture' I shall examine such areas as singing, dancing, festivals, ritual behaviour, lived religion and social relations) and a heuristic model, which enables a properly 'thick' description of late antique culture, in all its richness. Popular culture in this way provides a framework for looking at the cultural, social and economic changes of late antiquity.

The challenge posed by the book is to look at late antique culture both from the outside and from its multiple 'insides'. We shall attempt to look at the practices and views not just of bishops like Caesarius and his colleagues, or even of the landowners who formed the primary audience for clerical discourse, but also of a much broader range of individuals and groups who lived in southern Gaul. We shall investigate the lived culture of urbanites, hilltop villagers, small-scale viticulturists and salt-panners. These people were church-goers, church-refusers, ritual practitioners of various types, sceptics, party-givers and party-goers. They were peasants, landowners, small-scale entrepreneurs, artisans, shepherds and indeed slaves. We shall attempt to reach them not only by reading, often 'against the grain', the religious texts of the period – sermons, conciliar acts, hagiography – but also by examining the material culture of the non-elite.

The present study will build on the work of many other scholars: the detailed studies of experts on the religious history of the period but also the rich harvest of archaeological work carried out in the region at the end of the last century, and published in the first decade of this one. This is the first work of history of the region to make use of this material in its analysis of social and cultural change in late antiquity. This is also an account of (late) ancient history that is engaged in theoretical and methodological issues as well as with those related to the intricacies of the literary and archaeological records. It is a study of social, cultural and religious history that deals with questions of class, gender and power. To return to the quote from Samuel Dill with which this chapter began,[2] it is an important aim of my book to restore visibility and agency to the individuals, societies and communities who made up the congregations (or indeed, did not) of Caesarius and his colleagues.

[2] Dill 1926: 235.

In this first, introductory chapter I shall begin by outlining what I (and others) mean by popular culture, then turn to look at ancient and late ancient evidence up close. Next the attention goes to late antique southern Gaul itself, with an outline account of the historical context. Finally, key sources, methods and themes are introduced.

What Is Popular Culture?

The definition of 'popular culture' that I shall use in this book is broad enough to be workable but does require some methodological and theoretical scaffolding. 'Popular culture', after all, is a heuristic *construct* rather than a clear objective *reality*, and as such it requires full methodological interrogation. I am guided by a seminal article by Stuart Hall, 'Notes on Deconstructing the "Popular"', which clearly stresses the *embeddedness* of popular culture. As Hall made clear: 'there is *no* whole, authentic, autonomous "popular culture" which lies outside the field of force of the relations of cultural power and domination'.[3] To begin with, then, popular culture does not exist as a free-floating substantive culture that belongs to any single group of people – in the case of late antique southern Gaul we cannot say, for instance, that we can identify unproblematically a 'peasant popular culture' The notion of embeddedness has further implications too: I share with Hall the conviction that any reading of popular culture must be *political*, even if not in the terms of crudely Marxist 'class relations'.

Next, popular culture, like cultural relations in general, must be understood as dynamic, never as static: 'what is essential to the definition of popular culture is the relations which define "popular culture" in a continuing tension (relationship, influence and antagonism) to the dominant culture. It is a conception of culture which is polarized around this cultural dialectic'.[4] That is, popular culture constitutes the meeting point between dominant and subaltern fields: it is indeed 'made' at *precisely* this intersection. It does not exist in isolation. Firstly, it is deeply embedded in social and economic relations – which are therefore one important focus of the book. Secondly, it is embedded in broader fields of culture and ideology – thus the dialectic between popular culture and the ideology of the expanding church constitutes another major focus.

Clearly, Hall's approach is just one of many theoretical takes on popular culture in existence. I shall briefly here consider just a few complementary

[3] Hall 1981: 232. [4] Hall 1981: 235.

approaches.[5] Michel de Certeau is much cited for his work exploring the *ré-emploi* (re-use) of popular culture by ordinary people. De Certeau's approach allows a focus on the creativity and inventiveness of these ordinary people rather than drawing a model of popular culture as a passive, consumer culture.[6] In a similar vein, we can learn from the post-structuralist approaches which approach popular culture as *bricolage*, as formulated by Claude Lévi-Strauss.[7] We can also note the growing interest in contemporary cultural studies in the seemingly straightforward concept of 'Everyday Life', including the study of 'things'.[8] It has indeed been suggested that when focusing on popular culture we should move our focus away from people to the 'Social Life of Things'.[9] Pierre Bourdieu's hugely influential concept of *cultural capital* is fundamental here,[10] with Holt Parker suggesting that popular culture can be defined as that which is produced for and consumed by those *lacking* cultural capital. Most crucially, Parker suggests that popular culture can best be understood as 'unauthorized culture'[11] – with the advantage that this definition bears no inherent political or aesthetic status, and implies no value judgement. As we shall see, this notion of popular culture as *unauthorized* works very well indeed when analysing late antique ecclesiastical discourse, which sought to demonize much of popular culture as 'unauthorized', using a range of tactics, which I shall unpick in the chapters to come.

So what, then, is the definition of popular culture used here? The model of popular culture that I use in this book is multifaceted. I am talking about substantive activities – a non-exclusive list would include festive behaviour, singing, dancing, eating and drinking, and insubordination, as well as tactics of memorization and knowledge transfer among the non-literate. But popular culture also, crucially, comprises strategies and techniques for interacting with structures of power. These activities – and others – are carried out by diverse non-elite individuals and communities. The category 'non-elite' is obviously wide and in the

[5] There are many useful readers and textbooks available to introduce the body of theoretical work; see, for instance, Bigsby 1976; Guins and Zaragoza Cruz 2005; Storey 2018, 2021; Strinati 2004. See now too Grig 2017a and especially Grig 2017b.
[6] An 'art of doing things': de Certeau 1984, especially xi–xxiii and 15–41.
[7] See Lévi-Strauss 1966, especially 16–23; for its application to the study of popular culture, see, for example, Hebdige 1979.
[8] See Highmore 2002; for the material culture aspect of this in particular, focusing on the study of 'things', see Attfield 2000.
[9] See Parker 2011: 159; the term derives from Appadurai 1998: 45, itself building on Baudrillard's essay 'The System of Objects': Baudrillard 1988: 16–17.
[10] An extended definition is elusive, but see Bourdieu 1977: especially 159–97; Parker 2011: 160, n. 69.
[11] Parker 2011: especially 165.

course of the following chapters we will look in some detail at a number of different groups, sometimes overlapping. They include small landowners, peasants, artisans (both urban and rural), *coloni*, slaves and beggars. During this analysis, therefore, we shall consider different types and degrees of subalternity. However, maintaining a broad spectrum is deliberate: many of the activities considered under the rubric of 'popular culture' were in fact carried out by people of all types. Indeed, in a running theme, our episcopal discourses persistently accuse even members of the lay elites of participating in what, for bishops, was unauthorized culture. Ultimately, popular culture is a heuristic concept which allows us to look at a cultural history that is fully embedded in structures of power, domination and inequality. It is also an approach that invites us to explore cultural change as coming from below as well as from above.

In this book I discuss late antiquity in part as an 'after': I explicitly set out to offer a study of the transformation of popular culture in this period, during the transition from the classical to the medieval world. This being the case, it is of course necessary to establish what type of popular culture existed *before* late antiquity in order to be transformed at this time; even if for reasons of space and focus, this will be a necessarily whistle-stop tour. Here it is worth pointing out once more that a major advantage of working on popular culture in the *late* ancient period is the huge advantage in terms of available source material. For instance, we have simply no relevant literary sources at all for southern Gaul during the republican and imperial periods – nothing that discusses the cultural and social life of the non-elite in any sustained way. However, we *are* able to compare what the archaeological evidence tells us about the relative lifestyles and material culture of earlier and later periods, and I shall do so at relevant junctures.

Looking at Ancient Popular Culture

The study of ancient popular culture itself has been neglected in comparison to other periods of pre-modern history until very recently; in the last few years we have seen an upsurge of interest in the history of subaltern cultures and in approaches to history from below among ancient historians.[12] More generally, however, classicists and ancient historians alike have been slow to respond to the important body of work from scholars of early modern popular culture, such as that of Peter Burke and Natalie Zemon Davis in the Anglo-American tradition, and of Robert

[12] For fuller discussion, see Grig 2017b: 9–21 and Courrier and Magalhães de Oliveira 2022.

Mandrou and Roger Chartier (inter alia) in French scholarship.[13] The work of early modern historians constitutes a discernible influence, as we shall see: so much so that perhaps historians (myself included!) need to be careful lest the study of popular culture becomes overly prone to what we might see as popular culture clichés, brilliant and persuasive as these influential interpretations are.

The most influential work in the study of early modern popular culture is undoubtedly Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, first (somewhat belatedly) published in English in 1968. Bakhtin argued for the symbolic centrality of the festival of Carnival to early modern culture. Both in Bakhtin's work and elsewhere, 'carnival' and the 'carnivalesque' are crucial concepts for understanding the key features of popular (Bakhtin himself called it 'folk') culture. According to Bakhtin, carnival offers a site for inversion, liberation and renewal. Comedy, the grotesque and the 'lower bodily stratum' all play roles in structuring a 'second world and a second life',[14] with potential for opposition and rebellion.[15] As neatly expressed by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, the carnivalesque is 'a potent populist, crucial inversion of all official worlds and hierarchies in a way that has implications far beyond the specific realm of Rabelais studies'.[16] This is not to say that the concept has not undergone critique,[17] but it remains impossible to overestimate the influence of Bakhtin, including on recent studies of ancient popular culture that I shall discuss in what follows. I shall discuss the utility of carnival for understanding late antique popular culture in general, and the festival of the Kalends of January specifically, in Chapter 6.

In the case of ancient history itself, meanwhile, the first ancient historian to attempt a full-length study of ancient popular culture was Pedro Paulo Funari in 1989.[18] At the heart of this work is an innovative study of Pompeian graffiti; Funari argued eloquently for the need for scholars to confront and elucidate 'another antiquity': 'An antiquity in which popular groups possessed a relative autonomy, as much in aesthetic terms as in its values and conceptions.'[19] It is regrettable that the impact of Funari's work has been somewhat limited, no doubt because it was originally published in

[13] For instance, Davis 1975; Burke 2009; Mandrou 1964; Chartier 1988. [14] Bakhtin 1968: 6.
[15] On carnival and resistance, see in particular Le Roy Laudurie 1979.
[16] Stallybrass and White 1986: 7. [17] Most importantly, Stallybrass and White 1986.
[18] Funari 1989, 1991.
[19] 'Una antigüedad en la que los grupos populares poseían una autonomía relativa, tanto en términos estéticos como en sus valores y concepiones', Funari 1991: 101.

Portuguese and has thus far been translated only into Spanish.[20] The first dedicated study of ancient popular culture written in English came, rather surprisingly, from a philologist best known for his work on Virgil: Nicolas Horsfall's *The Culture of the Roman Plebs*, published in 2003.[21] Horsfall's fascinating short book describes the 'culture of the plebs' as

> a 'parallel' culture, in its own way rich, varied and robustly vigorous: it has little enough to do with those literary texts which have bequeathed to us such a magnificent set of cultural and social blinkers, but rests rather on theatre, games in various senses, music, songs, dance, memory and has amply demonstrated its ability to survive almost unaltered at least into late antiquity.[22]

Here in place of Funari's 'relative autonomy' we have a '"parallel" culture'. Song and memory are key planks of Horsfall's analysis, which focuses almost entirely on literary texts, which he mines for evidence of an oral culture, neglected by generations of scholars. Horsfall takes a synchronic rather than a diachronic approach, tending to see his plebeian culture as rather more timeless than most historians would.[23] This does, however, enable him to adduce Caesarius as a key witness for the persistence of song in popular culture – an important move, as we shall see later in this book.

The culture of the Roman plebs has been investigated more recently still, with a more historical approach, by Cyril Courrier.[24] Courrier depicts the Roman plebs not as an oppressed mass, a starving mob or a *Lumpenproletariat*, but as a stable community, able to develop a culture of their own. The Roman plebs as depicted by Courrier have a sense of self-esteem based on professional, work-based pride. Moreover, their political interests went far beyond 'bread and circuses': this is a picture of a highly politicized *plebs*, even though the advent of the imperial system clearly entailed a new type of political life. Nonetheless, as a caveat we should note that much of Courrier's analysis deals, often explicitly as such, with what we might call a plebeian elite – as ever, the easiest tranche of popular culture to access.

Focusing more widely than the plebs as narrowly defined, Jerry Toner's social-historical study *Popular Culture in Ancient Rome* takes a straightforward approach to 'the culture of the non-elite'.[25] Nonetheless, he makes the sensible qualification that '[t]he non-elite were too great a hotchpotch of differing

[20] Although Funari recapitulated and summarized his graffiti study in English as Funari 1993.
[21] This is in fact an English version of an Italian original: Horsfall 1996. [22] Horsfall 2003: 66–7.
[23] Horsfall 2003: 23–5. [24] Courrier 2014; see too, more briefly, Courrier 2017.
[25] Toner 2009: 1.

groups to be united by a single, monolithic culture. They inhabited a complex world of different geographies, wealth and status levels that meant that no uniform way of life could ever exist.'[26] For Toner, popular culture can be understood not least as a series of coping strategies through which the non-elite faced the difficult world in which they lived. There is a fascinating sensory component to this picture of popular culture – smell, touch and noise feature vividly, showing how the senses distinguish popular from elite culture.[27] The carnivalesque makes an appearance, headlined by the Roman festival of Saturnalia.[28]

In general, there has been very little study of the popular culture of ancient Greece, for several reasons. Firstly, the lack of *evidence* is of course crucial, most notably for any polity outside Athens, but even for Athens the body of source material is tiny in comparison with the Roman, let alone the late ancient period. Moreover, Mirko Canevaro has recently argued that the very notion of popular culture is problematic for classical Athens, in that the dominant, official culture was indeed by many definitions 'popular'.[29] Finally, we should acknowledge that different degrees of subalternity – that is, the different levels of inequality between classical Greece and later Rome[30] – also have an impact on the nature of popular culture in Greece and Rome, respectively. Nonetheless, the popular culture of classical Greece has made an appearance in scholarship in recent years. Leslie Kurke, even while stating that popular culture is 'probably . . . a misnomer' for the ancient world,[31] provides an intriguing study of the figure of Aesop. She argues that Aesop, or rather the texts of the Aesopic tradition, enable(s) us to trace a dialogue, or dialectic, between 'high' and 'low'.[32] Meanwhile, in the highly ambitious *Slaves Tell Tales* Sara Forsdyke sought to uncover the dynamics and politics of popular culture in archaic and classical Greece.[33] Forsdyke's book very clearly shows the challenges of writing a history of popular culture for a period where the sources are highly fragmentary. Concerted use is made throughout of theoretical and comparative literature: Forsdyke is indeed explicit about the need to interpret ancient popular culture through the use of models taken from scholarship

[26] Toner 2009: 2. [27] Toner 2009: especially 123–61 (ch. 4: 'Common Scents, Common Senses').
[28] Toner 2009: ch. 3: 'The World Turned Bottom Up' (pp. 92–122); also ch. 5: 'Popular Resistance' (pp. 162–84).
[29] Canevaro 2017.
[30] Current scholarship stresses that levels of inequality in the classical Greek world were very low in comparison to other pre-modern and even modern states: for example, Ober 2015: especially 71–100.
[31] Kurke 2011: 7.
[32] For example, on the *Life of Aesop* as 'the layered bricolage of multiple acts and agents': Kurke 2011: 25.
[33] Forsdyke 2012.

outside the classical world.[34] For instance, she interprets Plutarch's anti-democratic account of riots in sixth-century BCE Megara with both Bakhtin's carnival and E. P. Thompson's 'moral economy' in mind.[35] I shall return to these themes in Chapter 6, with a much wider range of (late) ancient source material at hand.

Having discussed popular culture rather in the abstract, it is time to move to much more concrete examples. So we shall make a detour to look at some striking comparative ancient evidence, from Pompeii in Italy, and from Aphrodisias in Caria, in modern Turkey, in order to consider a popular culture approach.[36] Both sites offer exceptional material evidence, including rich bodies of inscribed texts of various kinds, which provide unrivalled insights into non-elite urban life in the ancient world and into late antiquity.[37] In this way I shall introduce some of the key themes and contexts of ancient popular culture – and how we can study them.

First we need to imagine an urban popular culture that was lived in public and shared spaces. In Pompeii the Via dell'Abbondanza gives a vivid impression of ancient street life: it stretches east from the forum all the way to the Sarno Gate, with a lively mixture of bars, shops, workshops and residential properties.[38] Businesses opened out into the street and open-air shrines marked crossroads, while the ubiquitous graffiti and other painted signs and images provide further evidence of the time people spent in the urban outdoors, such as a *dipinto* asking loiterers to move on, or bantering graffiti contests between love rivals.[39] In Aphrodisias the recently excavated 'urban park', known as the 'Place of Palms',[40] newly restored in late antiquity, likewise gives a suggestive glimpse of what we might call a landscape of popular culture. Graffiti enables us to see that this was a space that combined a range of functions, including commercial,

[34] Forsdyke 2012: 49. [35] Forsdyke 2012: 117–43; see Thompson 1971; see pp. 209–10.

[36] The collection of graffiti from Pompeii amounts to over 10,000 entries in *CIL*, volume 4; locations and buildings/rooms are given using the conventional numbering system devised by Fiorelli. On the late antique inscriptions of Aphrodisias, see Roueché 2004 ('ALA'); I shall also draw on the recent publication of the 'Place of Palms' (Wilson and Russell in press).

[37] It is urban life that I shall consider here, but as will be discussed later on for the case of Arles, the interdependence of city and hinterland remains a key feature in late antiquity.

[38] See Wallace-Hadrill 1990 on the lack of social zoning; compare Nicholas Purcell on the centrality of the *taberna* to urban life in antiquity: Purcell 1994: 659–62.

[39] No loitering here: VII.11.12: *CIL* 4.813: *otiosis locus hic non est, discede morator*. Rival lovers spar on a bar frontage: I.10.2–3 = *CIL* 4.8258–9; see Kellum 1999: especially 285 and 287 and Hartnett 2017: 105–6. Street furniture facilitated 'loitering' by design: see Hartnett 2017: 195–223 on the role of benches in ancient streetscapes; more than 100 have been identified in Pompeii alone.

[40] Previously known as the 'South Agora'.

professional and leisure activities – from meetings of associations to shopping to idling with board games.[41]

Next, several factors combined to make the lower classes especially visible outdoors, and in public spaces: the nature of lower-class housing obviously made sociability in spaces such as taverns more likely, while under-employment was a common feature in the lives of the poor. The propensity of the lower classes to 'hang about' in the urban open air was noted with suspicion and indeed scorn by elite commentators, including during late antiquity. Ammianus Marcellinus was only the latest in a long line of critics of lower-class leisure,[42] combining several key topoi common to disapproving elite views of popular culture:

> But of the multitude of lowest condition and greatest poverty some spend the entire night in wineshops, some lurk in the shade of the awnings of the theatres . . . or they quarrel with one another in their dice games, making a disgusting sound by drawing back their breath into their resounding nostrils, or, which is the favourite among all amusements, from sunrise until evening, in sunshine and rain, they stand open-mouthed, examining minutely the good points or the defects of charioteers and their horses.[43]

And likewise: 'These spend all their life with wine and dice, in low haunts, pleasures, and the games. Their temple, their dwelling, their assembly, and the height of all their hopes is the Circus Maximus.'[44]

Locations particularly frequented by the non-elite came under frequent attack, not just from moralists but also from imperial legislation. As is well known, taverns (variously, but not always distinctly or consistently, identified as *popinae* and *cauponae*)[45] were frequently targeted by legislation, for instance banning the sale of food in taverns in order to limit their

[41] Over 500 items of informal writing, drawing and carving have been recorded.
[42] See Toner 1995: especially 63–88; Laurence 1994: 80–1.
[43] *Ex turba vero imae sortis et paupertinae, in tabernis aliqui pernoctant vinariis, non nulli sub velabris umbraculorum theatralium latent . . . aut pugnaciter aleis certant, turpi sono fragosis naribus introrsum reducto spiritu concrepantes; aut quod est studiorum omnium maximum ab ortu lucis ad vesperam sole fatiscunt vel pluviis, per minutias aurigarum equorumque praecipua vel delicta scrutantes*. Amm. Marc. 14.6.25; trans. Rolfe.
[44] *Hi omne quod vivunt vino et tesseris impendunt et lustris, et voluptatibus et spectaculis: eisque templum et habitaculum et contio et cupitorum spes omnis Circus est maximus*. Amm. Marc. 28.4.29.
[45] *Caupona* generally designated a tavern which also offered accommodation, while a *popina* could be a very small establishment; both generally offered food as well as drink; *thermopolium* is also used of establishments serving food and drink.