

Introduction
*The Violence of Small Worlds: Rethinking Small-Scale
Social Control in Late Antiquity*

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Historians have tended to see the great cultural, social, and political conflicts of late antiquity through the lens of institutions: the movements of armies, the speeches of senators, the bizarre effervescence of urban violence that so often resulted from the deliberations of church councils. And yet a revolution has taken place in the wider historical discipline across the last generation, which has much to offer the study of late antiquity.

Beginning in the 1970s, historians of later periods began to explore ‘large questions in small places’¹ under the banner of microhistory, using inquisition documents to support sustained discussion of small-scale communities and socially disadvantaged protagonists who had otherwise left little trace in the historical record. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s *Montaillou* illuminated the social world of a village in the Pyrenees around the end of the thirteenth century,² while Carlo Ginzburg reconstructed the experience and world-view of the Italian miller Domenico Scandella, known as Menocchio, who was burned at the stake as a heretic in 1599.³

Another branch of the microhistory movement has explored the ‘small worlds’ of rural estates and settlements from archives and legal disputes, considering how small-scale social technologies of power affected the relationship between landowners and their dependents. For example, Wendy Davies’ study of Medieval Brittany and Stephanie McCurry’s *Masters of Small Worlds* on the antebellum South Carolina low country have changed how we understand the vertical relationships between

¹ The phrase ‘large questions in small places’ is that of Charles Joyner; see C. Joyner, ‘From Here to There and Back Again: Adventures of a Southern Historian’, in J. B. Boles, ed., *Shapers of Southern History: Autobiographical Reflections* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 137–63.

² E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou, Village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

³ C. Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e i vermi. Il cosmo di un mugnaio del Cinquecento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1976); on the history of the term ‘microhistory’, see C. Ginzburg, ‘Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It’, *Critical Inquiry*, 20 (1993), 10–35.

peasant and lord or slave and master.⁴ It is in this sense that the essays which follow have taken the idea of ‘small worlds’ as a starting point.⁵

Our focus in what follows is on the ‘little big men’⁶ of the Roman provinces – and of course the women as well – the prosperous but unglamorous individuals who had inherited or managed to commandeer control of a petty kingdom, in the form of a household, a church, a school, or a monastery. We know these men and women better than we knew their predecessors, thanks to a new kind of source material surviving from the fourth century onward: the letters, sermons, and essays of Christian bishops and, to a lesser extent, ascetics. (A smattering of similar material survives from the third century, but it is with the conversion of Constantine that churches and monasteries began to preserve the writings of their leaders on a large scale.)

Jaclyn Maxwell has drawn attention to the systematic efforts of fourth-century Christian preachers to improve public morality among their congregations, the impulse which drove the production of our source material. In comparison to even the most ambitious proposals for collective moral formation elsewhere in the late Roman world, such as those of the orator Themistius (d. 387), Christian efforts were far more effective:

there was something new in the intensity with which speakers attempted to convey information to their listeners and in the regularity of the assemblies. The relationship between Christian preacher and layperson was more structured and more rigorous than someone like Themistius would have even hoped for. This meant that people came to listen, even when moral rules were not their favorite topic, and that preachers had to try to explain their teachings in ways that people would understand.⁷

⁴ See, e.g., W. Davies, *Small Worlds: The Village Community in Early Medieval Brittany* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), and S. McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁵ The term ‘small worlds’ carries a different connotation among social scientists, for whom it evokes the work of psychologist Stanley Milgram, whose 1967 ‘small world’ experiment influenced the development of modern Social Network Analysis; see S. Milgram, ‘The Small World Problem’, *Psychology Today*, 22 (1967), 61–7, and subsequent publications.

⁶ The phrase is Peter Brown’s, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of the Christian West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 398.

⁷ J. L. Maxwell, *Christianization and Communication in Late Antiquity: John Chrysostom and his Congregation in Antioch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 86–7. For religious and moral formation in late antique cities, see also I. Sandwell, *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity: Greeks, Jews and Christians in Antioch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Themistius envisaged a law requiring the entire population to listen to moral precepts, but it was the Christians who established a channel for getting a substantial portion of the population to actually do so.

A brilliant recent study of North Africa by Leslie Dossey offers an insight into the kinds of social disruptions that challenged contemporaries and resulted in calls for moral instruction. Dossey characterised the fourth century as an age when prosperity was accompanied by a profound social uneasiness:

This uneasiness was displayed in a variety of ways: gently mocking small farmers for building bathhouses on their tiny plots of land . . . polemics against the circumcellions for pitching landlords off their carriages and hurling themselves into a suicidal frenzy against the imperial military. Because of the crossing of boundaries – economic, communal, and mental – the world seemed to be spinning out of control.⁸

Christian writers were intensely interested in the moral lives of peasants and townsmen, so even if that interest was often critical or even sarcastic, the efforts of these men and women to keep their small worlds from spinning out of control are far more visible in the historical record than they would have been in previous centuries, and it is on this record that many of the chapters in the present volume focus.

Part of the genius of Roman rule had always been the habit of aligning the interest of local and regional authorities with that of the ruling power wherever possible. Trying to understand how this worked in practice has given rise to one of the most vital seams of writing by Roman historians in recent decades, beginning with Fergus Millar's *The Emperor in the Roman World*.⁹ Millar reconsidered the lines of communication between the imperial administration and regional elites, suggesting that the constant production of rescripts to petitions by local and regional elites allowed imperial policy-making, and thus Roman government in the provinces, to evolve in a way that was less programmatic than responsive. Subsequent studies by Greg Woolf and J. E. Lendon developed Millar's insights into the nature of interaction between the empire and provincial elites. Lendon documented the importance of informal relationships and favour-trading among the governing class, while Woolf traced the 'Romanisation' of a conquered province as a complex and mutually beneficial on-the-ground

⁸ L. Dossey, *Peasant and Empire in Christian North Africa* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 200.

⁹ F. Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World* (London: Duckworth, 1977), which builds on the same author's 'Emperors at Work', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 57 (1967), 9–19.

negotiation between local elites – who were often able to make inspired use of the resources and mechanisms introduced by Roman governors – and the governors or other representatives of the capital.¹⁰

Ritual and culture played a central role in articulating and negotiating the relationship between local elites and the imperial centre. The alignment between larger and smaller systems was very much in the interest of the middle men. In an influential study of the imperial cult in Roman Asia Minor, Simon Price traced how cult practices previously understood as ‘top-down’ initiatives were in fact engineered by regional elites, who wanted to be seen both by their local subordinates and by Roman governors as indispensable brokers mediating the relationship between the central authority and regional manpower.¹¹ James Rives has documented a similar dynamic in Roman Africa;¹² here, it is inscriptions that allow us to gain a glimpse of the ambitions of regional elites.

It is in legal sources that the balance of agency involved in the relation between local elites and representatives of the imperial administration is most visible.¹³ In a much-cited study of legal *tabellae* Elizabeth Meyer has shown that legal instruments were widely understood as a public and ritually visible ratification of already-existing power relations and commitments.¹⁴ But close examination of court records in Egypt reveals how landowners and *patresfamilias* promoted their own interests in their dealings with the central administration, and used their position as brokers of communication between the centre and the localities as an opportunity to enhance their position in local networks. Ari Bryen characterises this tireless self-promotion as seen from above:

From the perspective of a Roman governor . . . the Greek-speaking world was composed of difficult, demanding, overlapping, needling populations each claiming the rights granted to them through their particular citizen statuses while simultaneously demanding that Roman governors often change or augment these rights.¹⁵

¹⁰ G. Woolf, *Becoming Roman: The Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); J. E. Lendon, *Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

¹¹ S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

¹² J. B. Rives, *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

¹³ See especially C. Ando, *Law, Language, and Empire in the Roman Tradition* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), with the response of A. Z. Bryen, ‘Judging Empire: Courts And Culture in Rome’s Eastern Provinces’, *Law and History Review*, 30 (2012), 771–811.

¹⁴ E. A. Meyer, *Legitimacy and Law in the Roman World: Tabulae in Roman Belief and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁵ Bryen, ‘Judging Empire’, 779.

Local elites could be expected to make active and strategic use of the imperial presence in the provinces to foster their own ambitions.

A particularly valuable thread of inquiry in recent years has focused on the settlement of disputes, especially in late Roman Egypt, where the papyrus sources make it possible to assess how opportunities for agency were shaped by specific and contingent circumstances. The mechanisms for validating the actions and claims of parties to a dispute were framed by legal and religious institutions. But factors such as gender or access to networks of support often coloured the availability of those mechanisms. At the same time, in the multicultural environment of Roman Egypt disputants sometimes had access to parallel structures sponsored by alternative institutions.

There is good evidence in late Roman Egypt for what legal anthropologists call ‘forum shopping’, individuals and families channelling claims and disputes in light of the specific opportunities for dispute resolution available in a given locality. What was the prospective balance of cost to benefit, for example, if a Christian sought a judgment through the proconsular assize or through the local episcopal court? Seeking resolution of a dispute involved an on-the-ground assessment of which forum could offer the most promising balance of likeliness to help and ability to do so.¹⁶ Contingency played an important role here. A guess about which judge or arbiter might be more sympathetic could have far-reaching consequences.

Studies of petitions and affidavits from civil and criminal cases have shed light on the dynamics of violence and intimidation in Egyptian towns and settlements. For example, Benjamin Kelly has shown that across the Roman period, formal litigation often went hand in hand with private violence and other forms of intimidation,¹⁷ while Ari Bryen has argued that surviving petitions to the Roman provincial administration evidence a strategic and proactive use of the legal system by plaintiffs both to articulate and sometimes to challenge the balance of power.¹⁸ Of special interest for the present volume, Sabine Hübner has shown that the papyri allow unprecedented insight into power and conflict at a more intimate

¹⁶ On legal pluralism and ‘forum shopping’, see C. Humfress, ‘Thinking through Legal Pluralism: “Forum Shopping” in the Later Roman Empire’, in J. Duindam, J. Harries, C. Humfress, and N. Hurvitz (eds.), *Law and Empire: Ideas, Practices, Actors* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 225–50, along with her monograph, *Multi-Legalism in Late Antiquity* (212–565 CE) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁷ B. Kelly, *Petitions, Litigation, and Social Control in Roman Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ A. Z. Bryen, *Violence in Roman Egypt: A Study in Legal Interpretation* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

scale level, that of household and family.¹⁹ Though the focus of the present volume is on the long arc of development from Constantine (d. 337) to Justinian (d. 565), these studies of Roman rule in the provinces of earlier periods have laid crucial groundwork. What emerges from this literature is an exciting but somewhat unruly set of interpretative questions. How did the everyday exercise of power and social control in small-scale communities align with the wide-scale exercise of power by civic and other institutions?

If law notionally protected the agency of women in these small-scale settings – at least in the case of citizen women – it was constrained by all-too-real relationships of power and intimidation. Consider, for example, the case of Aurelia Artemis, a small-scale landowner in the Egypt of Diocletian who found to her distress that a powerful neighbour's offer of assistance had in fact been a stratagem to annex her property. The surviving papyri related to her case show her carrying a complaint up and down the system of criminal justice, an expensive, time-consuming, and at best frustrating process whose outcome is sadly not documented.²⁰ Within her own household and even her neighbourhood, the widow Artemis may have ruled with an iron will, and yet in her dealings with government officials she adopts a pose of something very like helplessness. Can we hope to assess the balance of perception and reality in such a case?

And can we begin to assess the process by which a widow like Artemis herself might hope to elicit help from magistrates, friends and relatives, or religious practitioners of various kinds, or choose between sources of assistance, especially in a context in which the legal system was so skewed in favour of male dominance? Another papyrus, P. Oxyrhynchus VI.903, preserves a fourth-century deposition by an unnamed wife, giving evidence that when a male protector – in this case a husband – turned hostile, it was

¹⁹ S. R. Hübner, *The Family in Roman Egypt: A Comparative Approach to Intergenerational Solidarity and Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013). It is also worth mentioning the work of legal historians not as deeply engaged with papyri, for example, J. Evans Grubbs, 'Parent–Child Conflict in the Roman Family: The Evidence of the Code of Justinian', in M. George (ed.), *The Roman Family in the Empire: Rome, Italy, and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 92–128.

²⁰ The key inscriptions are P. Sakaon 31, 7 and P. Thead. 15, 18; for discussion, see C. Kotsifou, 'A Glimpse into the World of Petitions: The Case of Aurelia Artemis and her Orphaned Children', in A. Chaniotis (ed.), *Unveiling Emotions: Sources and Methods for the Study of Emotions in the Greek World* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2012), 317–27. The case is also discussed by S. Connolly, *Lives behind the Laws: The World of the Codex Hermogenianus* (Bloomington; Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 19–20, and J. Evans Grubbs, *Women and Law in the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook on Marriage, Divorce and Widowhood* (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 257–60.

invaluable for women and children to have access to systems of support that were more immediate than that offered by a distant governor.²¹ Within the domestic and village setting, the support offered by religious networks – in this case by a Christian bishop – was often essential. Gatekeepers of supernatural power could offer a focus of grievance against the powerful in the here and now.

Social Control in the Small Worlds of Late Antiquity

Our aim in the present volume has been to consider a wide variety of social relationships in households, estates, and other small-scale communities. These power relationships – between slaves and masters, children and parents, monks and abbots, bishops and their congregations, pupils and teachers – created the skeleton of the social order. Since small-scale social structures were aligned to the wider social and political fabric, disruption or instability at this comparatively intimate social plane could have a knock-on effect on larger and more visible social structures. The success or failure of these relationships could tip the social balance toward stability or change.

In recent years, both Peter Brown and Kyle Harper have called attention to the growing importance of the ‘middling sort’ across the fourth and fifth centuries.²² Recent demographic work makes a distinction between ‘elite’ households – the top 1 per cent that included the curial class – and the next 10 per cent identified as the middling stratum: bourgeois and agricultural households with up to five slaves.²³ Our sources tend to blur the distinction between the lower part of the 1 per cent – the locally based elites of the curial class – and the middling stratum, satirising and

²¹ P. Oxy. VI.903 is discussed by P. Clark, ‘Women, Slaves and the Hierarchies of Domestic Violence: The Family of St Augustine’, in S. R. Joshel (ed.), *Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture* (London: Routledge, 1998), 109–29, and L. Dossey, ‘Wife Beating and Manliness in Late Antiquity’, *Past & Present*, 199 (2008), 2–40; see also K. Cooper, ‘Closely Watched Households: Visibility, Exposure, and Private Power in the Roman *Domus*’, *Past & Present*, 197 (2007), 3–33, at 29–31, and literature cited there.

²² Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 21–3 (at 22): ‘In the society of the fourth century West, the future lay . . . with landowners of the provinces’, and Kyle Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275–425* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 16, 25, 32, and 41, for discussion of the ‘middling’ classes in the late and post-Roman worlds.

²³ Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World*, 40–1, citing W. Scheidel and S. J. Friesen, ‘The Size of the Economy and the Distribution of Income in the Roman Empire’, *Journal of Roman Studies*, 99 (2009), 61–91. At 56–8 Harper suggests that the ‘middling’ orders represented between 6 and 12 per cent of a fourth-century population of roughly 50 million, with the higher end of the scale more likely.

sympathising with the troubles and moral weaknesses of the prosperous peasant and the cash-strapped decurion fairly indiscriminately. In what follows we will often consider regional elites alongside the ‘middling’ orders, but it is the latter that will come into focus most clearly.

We shall see in what follows that Christian sources of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries offer a distinctive insight into the concerns of this group. These sources tend to be written from the point of view of those responsible for maintaining small worlds: the masters and teachers, and of course the bishops. In one sense this is regrettable, since we would like to know more about those further down the social scale. Yet there is still much to be discovered about this layer of the social order – the layer of the ‘middling sort’. These were powerful individuals, but their power had limits.

Power was always vulnerable to challenge. In order to maintain their position, elites had to focus their attention downward as well as upward, spending considerable energies engaging with those below them in the social ladder. In the ‘small world’ of the town, estate, monastery, or household, the *dominus* or *domina* might claim to rule, but the effectiveness of that claim depended on a thousand incremental successes in negotiating relationships. It was necessary to curb the will of subordinates, on the understanding that one’s position – and even the social order itself – depended on being seen to keep others in line with a firm hand. Sometimes, the appearances were as important – and as effort-consuming – as the reality.

But the mere presence of ideals and identities is never self-evidently sufficient to bring about social cohesion. Symbolic systems nearly always require human agents to animate them. Modern fieldwork-based studies have found that, however deeply they are felt, identities and values depend on social bonds and emotional motivations for their momentum and staying power.²⁴ When they are at their most effective, human agents pour their energies into interlocking roles which reinforce each other reciprocally, allowing members of small-scale units like families, schools, and villages to experience social control as part of the ‘natural’ order of things.

²⁴ J. Lofland and R. Stark, ‘Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective’, *American Sociological Review* 30 (1965), 862–75. For an application of this work to interpreting the spread of early Christianity, see R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Foucault and Bourdieu have charted the close relationship between punishment and the mechanisms of social control which subject individuals are trained to internalise in a successful social system; in what follows we will return frequently to the evidence for such a relationship in the ‘small worlds’ of late antiquity.²⁵ Stable power relations require the management of subjectivities. The perceptions of subject individuals must be encouraged to dovetail with a material system of discipline and punishment.

The stability of a community thus relied on the willingness of its members to internalise norms and to watch one another for signs of nonconformity. Modern research confirms that reminding people that they are being watched can be a strong driver towards conformity to social norms.²⁶ The desire for social recognition is an especially powerful tool when it is integrated into a pattern of cultural expectations – a point that was obvious to late ancient writers and preachers, who made expert use of the impulse to conformity and the desire for belonging, and even the human readiness to find fault in others.

For those who sought to impose authority, then, the aim was to cultivate an almost instinctive responsiveness in subordinates: a spectrum of attitudes ranging from obedience, dependence, and loyalty to reciprocal obligation. Lords and masters could not retain their position indefinitely unless they could display evidence of assent to their position by those they claimed to rule.²⁷ This was true for emperors and governors, but equally for parents, husbands, teachers, abbots, bishops, and slaveholders.

A useful concept drawn from Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the sociology of education and social reproduction is that of ‘misrecognition’: in order to remain in power, elites must persuade those below them in the social pyramid that the shape of the social order is natural and inevitable, rather than the contingent outcome of a struggle for power.²⁸ The inevitability of the powers-that-be becomes a social fiction which must repeatedly be reasserted and reformulated. The perceptions of social participants must repeatedly be channelled to ‘recognise’ the collective social fiction as truth.

²⁵ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, A. Sheridan (trans.) (New York, NY: Vintage, 1977).

²⁶ M. Bateson, D. Nettle, and G. Roberts, ‘Cues of Being Watched Enhance Cooperation in a Real World Setting’, *Biology Letters*, 2 (2006), 412–14; K. J. Haley and D. M. T. Fessler, ‘Nobody’s Watching? Subtle Cues Affect Generosity in an Anonymous Game’, *Evolution of Human Behaviour*, 26 (2005), 245–56.

²⁷ Cooper, ‘Closely Watched Households’, 7–8.

²⁸ P. Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, R. Nice (trans.) (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

And of course, social control in late antiquity was also asserted through violence. We should not understand violence in a narrow sense, as referring only to physical acts such as beating unruly pupils or recalcitrant slaves, but rather as a continuum exerted across a spectrum of action and discourse. The World Health Organization's 2002 *World Report on Violence and Health* identifies four modes of violence: physical, sexual, psychological, and privative.²⁹ Privative violence, for instance, is defined as denying, or neglecting to provide, access to resources and functions as a form of social control. Although violence, domination, and control can take explicit and physical forms, the intimate connection between concrete and symbolic forms of violence comes into focus in the chapters that address the rhetorical uses to which late ancient authors put violent imagery. In late antiquity, power relations were articulated not only through the control of material resources and the assertion of physical dominance but also through the display, exchange, and withholding of social and cultural capital. Then, as now, symbolic and implicit violence had their own specific power.

Schools, monasteries, and churches played a pivotal role in enforcing and reproducing the social order, and their work of cultivating obedient subjects often involved symbolic or actual violence. These chapters offer a number of different ways of thinking about how a range of violent practices contributed to the making of individuals and communities. We have sought to understand how leaders used every tool at their disposal – from displays of rhetorical virtuosity to scare tactics and even physical violence – to draw members into their communities and to intensify the commitment of new members once they had joined, drawing them into alignment as sharers of an interdependent subjectivity.

The effectiveness of such practices in destabilising individuals and initiating processes of self-reinvention and integration into a social role is borne out by recent Anglophone work on social reproduction, which has shown that harsh physical treatment, regulation, and surveillance can play a pivotal role in the process of cultivating the subjectivity of initiates into a community.³⁰ These disciplinary practices often generate strong horizontal relationships among participants alongside the formal vertical hierarchies

²⁹ World Health Organization, *World Report on Violence and Health* (2002), www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/world_report/en/, last accessed August 11 2017.

³⁰ A. T. Chappell and L. Lanza-Kaduce, 'Police Academy Socialization: Understanding the Lessons Learned in a Paramilitary-Bureaucratic Organization', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 39 (2010), 205; B. S. Turner, 'Warrior Charisma and the Spiritualization of Violence', *Body & Society*, 9 (2003), 103–5; D. Levine, 'Martial Arts as a Resource for Liberal Education: The Case of Aikido',