

On Shaky Ground: Elites and their Discontents

If nothing else, the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated just how difficult it is for most modern states to regulate—let alone compel—the behavior of populations under their purview. For good or ill, technological opacity, social complexity, cultural heterogeneity, and the tenacity of local allegiances attenuate the otherwise extraordinary reach and efficiency of governmental power, even in the age of the surveillance state.

Impediments to the control and regulation of populations were all the more pronounced in the imperial polities of the ancient world whose ruling elites could scarcely dream of the technological mechanisms and bureaucratic apparatuses that undergird the workings of the modern state. As James C. Scott has recently stressed in his revisionist history of the so-called agricultural revolution, the ancient state was labile.¹ Crop domestication and even sedentism led neither rapidly nor ineluctably to state-formation. And even after the first city-states had formed along the Tigris and Euphrates in the late fourth millennium BCE, unstable ecological conditions set in motion recurrent cycles of food-shortages and waves of disease that were exacerbated by population density in the new urban agglomerations. This precarity was felt not only by the urban classes who stood most to benefit from the emergent civic and imperial institutions, but all the more so by the agricultural laborers—whether nominally free or enslaved—on whose backs the new structures of “civilized” life were built. Resistance to the coercive force of these early states was endemic, often succeeding in generating social spaces beyond their reach or even leading to their wholesale dissolution.

1. James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); see also now the complementary account in David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021).

Scott's account, which builds on decades of specialist work by archaeologist, ancient historians, environmental historians, demographers, biologists, and epidemiologists, will perhaps be most surprising to readers who spend little time thinking about premodern polities.² But I think it can also serve as a provocation for those of us who study the ancient world to re-assess the legal and normative rhetoric of ruling elites regarding the capacity of imperial, economic, and religious institutions to regulate life in ancient societies, not only in the rural hinterland but also especially among the urban classes.

The current issue of *Studies in Late Antiquity* presents several papers that subject the ideologies of control propagated by imperial and ecclesiastical leaders to critical scrutiny, thereby revealing the persistent fissures and gaps within the structures of authority that undergirded the societies of Late Antiquity. Anne-Valérie Pont's "Local Christian Elites on the Public Scene in the Third Century: Methodological Assessments on Conventional Behaviors and Minor Arrangements" explores the elasticity and ambiguity that characterized the public performance of civic service by the ruling elite of the Roman Empire in the late third century and very early years of the fourth, before the legalization of Christianity under Emperor Constantine. This study centers on a recently published funerary inscription from Kios in Bithynia from the years preceding the Great Persecution. It integrates Christian idioms into its language of civic commemoration in a manner that scholars have traditionally regarded as implausible for the period prior to the legalization of Christianity. By contrast, Pont provides compelling support for integrating this document into a regular civic context that could accommodate public officials with varied religious commitments. Moreover, she marshals a wide array of inscriptional, administrative, and literary sources—both from Asia Minor and from other provinces in the empire—that show how Christian elites could fulfill local civic functions and even take part in traditional public rituals despite pressures that were brought to bear on them by both imperial and ecclesiastical authorities. This study not only demonstrates how profoundly situational social identity was in the ancient Mediterranean world generally, but also illuminates the carefully calibrated tactics that Christian civic elites employed to navigate the always shifting and often treacherous terrain of Roman public life on the eve of Constantine's ascension.

2. For assessment of both the value and the limitations of Scott's generalist treatment of the historical data and specialist scholarship on which he builds his argument, see the review of the book by Seth Richardson in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 77 (2018): 307–11.

If writing itself is one of the most outstanding—indeed revolutionary— inventions of civilization, then it is not surprising that the written sources produced by urban elites so often papered over the fractures in the institutions they controlled. As Cassandra Casias demonstrates in “Rebel Nuns and the Bishop Historian: The Competing Voices of Radegund and Gregory,” literary texts like the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours (538–594) sublimate the competing interests and perspectives that inevitably pit rival elites against each other into idealized narratives of the proper functioning of power and authority. The article explores a letter preserved within the pages of Gregory’s *Histories* that Radegund, former wife of the Merovingian King Clothar, had written to the bishops of Gaul to establish a new convent. The letter testifies to the remarkable autonomy that Radegund achieved for herself and her followers. But, in order to buttress his own precarious social position, Gregory framed Radegund’s letter not as an expression of her distinctive influence within Merovingian society but as a parade example of female obedience to ecclesiastical authority. Casias’s astute textual archaeology offers us a revealing example of how so often the center is said to have held only in the privileged hindsight of our literary sources.

Even Roman law, which might be thought to have carried inherent or at least inherited authority in the Roman and post-Roman worlds, required novel forms of legitimation with the rise of Christianity as the religion of the empire. In his study of a newly discovered ninth-century manuscript of the *Collatio Legum Mosaicarum et Romanarum*, an anonymous compendium of quotations from the Hebrew Bible and Roman law from Late Antiquity, Robert Frakes illuminates the role that biblical law and the figure of Moses as lawgiver played in the reception of Roman law in the medieval west. His “Reading the *Collatio Legum Mosaicarum et Romanarum* (or *Lex Dei*) in the Middle Ages” reminds us that it was far from a foregone conclusion that Roman law would retain its authority as the dominant legal tradition in post-Roman Christian societies. The otherwise unparalleled juxtaposition of “God’s law” with Roman law in the *Collatio* proved to be a decisive source of ideological justification for the copying and studying of Roman legal sources by early medieval scribes and scholars. The transmission of this idiosyncratic text demonstrates that even the most seemingly resilient pillars of imperial states are constantly subject to the forces of erosion and thus ever in need of shoring up.

If historical change represented a continual threat to the stability and longevity of traditions of governance, so, too, did the perennial tension

between urban centers and their rural hinterlands. In their “A Late Antique Rural Community in Mérida: The Site of Casa Herrera,” Javier Martínez Jiménez and Isaac Sastre de Diego present the results of excavations at one of the richest examples of a rural Christian settlement from late antique Spain. The sheer chronological range of occupation at Casa Herrera—running from early imperial Rome to the end of the Umayyad period—enables them to trace continuities and ruptures in economic relations, environmental conditions, architectural styles, and socio-religious institutions over the course of almost a millennium. Among the most significant archaeological finds at the site are a set of buildings that the authors interpret as the remains of a rural monastic community that grew up around a funerary basilica that had been established in the fifth century by the elite of the nearby city of Mérida. The site illuminates how new monastic foundations with ties to the ecclesiastical leadership of Mérida could drive the growth of nucleated rural settlements in the countryside, while at the same time extending the reach of urban elites into the rural hinterland. Even if these specific historical factors are particular to late antique sites like Casa Herrera, this type of asymmetrical power dynamic between city and countryside is as old as civilization itself. And yet, as Scott might remind us, the unmistakable material traces of the economic, social, and cultural networks that linked Casa Herrera to Mérida also attest the relentless expenditure of resources that was always required of urban elites if they were to maintain control over the rural populations on which they were so dependent for their way of life.

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This issue of *Studies in Late Antiquity* is the first to appear without Elizabeth DePalma Digeser listed on the masthead as Editor-in-Chief; she will now appear under the august title “Founding Editor, emerita.” But Beth’s vision for the journal and the immense thought and effort she poured into it are evident throughout this issue, from her commitment to interdisciplinary methodologies to her promotion of a diverse and truly global community of scholars within the field of Late Antiquity. I am honored to be carrying Beth’s labor of love forward with Kristina (Tina) Sessa of The Ohio State University, who brings her characteristic combination of generosity and critical acumen to her new position as Editor-in-Chief of *SLA*.