

Everyday Life in extremis

On the morning following the murderous shooting spree at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas—and ten days after the white-supremacist homicides at Tops Friendly Market in a largely Black neighborhood in east Buffalo—I was talking with a parent of a child in my first-grader's class about whether they had discussed these recent events with their children. I myself had not found what I felt was the right time or the right words to tell my own children about the shootings. This parent related to me how that conversation had gone in their household. Their first-grader had, at first, thought that the murders had occurred at our elementary school and immediately declared that they would never go to school again. When their parent tried to reassure them that the shooting had happened elsewhere—far away, in Texas—the child wanted to know exactly how far away Texas was. How long would it take to fly there? How long would it take to drive there? How long would it take to walk there? Only such quantifiable facts about how far away “far away” really was would assuage their fears—and then just enough to consent to be brought to school that morning.

What is normal? What is extreme? What is gained by habituating ourselves to the precarious—and sometimes terrifying—conditions of our lives? What is lost by subsuming such loss and pain into everyday life? Should we accustom ourselves to armed guards posted at our schools, our houses of worship, our movie theaters, our supermarkets, our cafés, our concert venues, our community centers, our public libraries, our university campuses? Should we put barbed wire around our elementary schools?

We intuitively sense that our basic capacity to function depends on our ability to rationalize risk, whether through the stories we tell ourselves about our place in the world or through back-of-the-envelope calculations about our temporal or spatial distance from danger. But are there limits to

acceptable normalization? These questions feel especially poignant when the dangers in whose shadow we are forced to live are the intentional results of people, institutions, and industries whose stated aim is to render our daily lives unlivable—when we are being terrorized not only by the sheer firepower that is so easily and legally available to our own family members, friends, and neighbors but also by those who despise us and want to see us dead because of our gender identities, our political commitments, the hue of our skin, our sexual orientations, our national or ethnic origins, our religious practices, or how our bodies and brains look or work. I doubt any possible answers I could give to my children about these problems would remotely satisfy their inquisitive, active, and anxious minds.

Contemplating just how often and in how many different settings people in the past have had to accommodate themselves to the extremities of warfare, violence, disease, or environmental degradation may offer us little consolation. And I have absolutely no doubt that what the children in our communities crave most of all is the simple reassurance that the adults around them are doing everything they possibly can to ensure that they are safe and sound as they go about their daily lives playing and learning. I am enraged that, under present circumstances, we have done disgracefully little to earn their trust.

Still, the historical record does provide examples of how others before us have wrestled with the perennial problem of living in the face of extremes. The Viewpoint Essay and four articles in the present issue of *Studies in Late Antiquity*, each in its own way, offer important insights into the dynamics of rupture and resilience, as these played out in particular times and places across the world of Late Antiquity. My own admittedly idiosyncratic take on this issue of *SLA* may be colored by the mood of despair that has settled on me these past few months. But it is my hope that readers of the journal will find resources in its pages for constructive reflection on the radical contingency of threat, vulnerability, and survival, both past and present.

The issue opens with an essay by Ryan Abrecht that considers how societies pitched at the edges of the great empires of the late antique world responded to the destabilizing forces of violence and climate change. In this thought-provoking piece, “Climate Change, Migration, and Violence in Late Antiquity: Lessons for Our Own Perfect Storm,” Abrecht reviews the evidence for the types of widespread disruption that the nomadic and seminomadic societies across the Eurasian landmass had to confront in order to survive. While the literary works produced in the Roman and Chinese

empires often tell us more about the biases of urban elites than they do about groups such as the Huns, Xianbei, or Türks, modern historians and scientists can—and should—develop multidisciplinary collaborations to study the nomadic experience, especially during times of social upheaval and environmental change. Abrecht calls much-needed attention to new research findings in a range of historical contexts that are too often studied in isolation. When seen as part of interconnected processes that shaped life in the Eurasian steppes, these case studies raise the possibility that the migrations of nomadic populations during the period of Late Antiquity represented an adaptive response to changing conditions that have gone unrecognized in the written historical record since antiquity. Abrecht stresses that further collaborative work will be required before we can draw firmer conclusions about these large-scale, if opaque, socio-environmental processes. But the essay argues that this line of research has the potential to engage students in our classrooms as well as the wider public beyond the academy in more informed and grounded discourse regarding the pressing nexus of violence, climate change, and migration that has already begun to reshape the social, economic, and political terrains of our contemporary world.

In “The Tower of Babel and Language Corruption: Approaching Linguistic Disasters in Late Antiquity,” Yuliya Minets offers a nuanced treatment of Christian theories of language change from Late Antiquity. The biblical story of the Tower of Babel provided a familiar model of linguistic diversification as divine retribution for human hubris. But she shows that this potent paradigm was only one among a range of approaches that Christian thinkers developed in order to explain the kaleidoscopic and always shifting linguistic landscape that they observed around them, both in the flawed speech of their contemporaries and in the unstable texts of their sacred scriptures. Some, instead, took a gradualist approach: linguistic evolution and variation were not wrought by cataclysmic punishment but are caused by the humdrum wear and tear of daily usage. In this account, it is the banal forces of indifference, carelessness, and ignorance—not to mention the malign influence of foreigners—that conspire to erode and even “corrupt” proper linguistic habits. Yet, as Minets observes, this impulse toward catastrophizing was particularly pronounced among Latin literati of the fifth to seventh centuries, who looked on as the western half of the Roman Empire contracted around them. In this same period, Greek-speaking Christian intellectuals tended toward a more measured and, at times, even optimistic appraisal of language change, which they observed from their perch within the strikingly

resilient empire of the Roman East. Minets thus suggests that these distinct approaches provided late ancient Christians a variety of models for interpreting events and processes that modern scholars often—sometimes in collusion with their historical subjects—present as unmitigated disasters.

Kevin Bloomfield's study of the remains of a Roman garrison at a Saharan oasis offers powerful testimony to human adaptability under extreme environmental conditions, even as it provides a parade example of institutional limitations and even failures in the face of intractable challenges. Among the extraordinary finds analyzed in "Climate and Daily Life in the Roman Sahara: The Case of the Gholaiia (Bu Njem) Oasis" are approximately 150 ostraca that record the ceaseless work that made quotidian life at the fort possible, if ever only barely. Many of these labors, such as the construction of housing and bathing amenities and the collection of fuel for heating and cooking, were the familiar lot of legionaries posted anywhere in the Roman Empire. But the exertion required to maintain a military encampment in the semiarid interior of Roman Africa was unusually arduous, necessitating modifications to the normal routines of army life. Basic provisions like food and oil had to be brought in across long distances and difficult terrain. The archaeological evidence suggests that limited supplies of firewood, exacerbated by accelerating deforestation, forced the soldiers to gather animal dung and agricultural byproducts for use as fuel. A poetic inscription dedicated to Salus, a Roman goddess associated with health, which was installed by the commanding centurion in the fort's bathhouse, offers us rare and poignant insight into the existential threat of disease that the soldiers faced. As Bloomfield shows, the Roman army never developed practices that would have made encampments like the one at Gholaiia viable in the long run. That the fort endured for as long as 60 years is perhaps a testament to the ingenuity of the Roman military apparatus and its rank-and-file. But without systematic investment in the ongoing viability of the fort or receptivity to local knowledge regarding sustainable resource management, the environmental pressures exerted by the desert generated problems for which the Roman army was unable to find permanent solutions. The costs of adaptation to life *in extremis* are always steep, but it is often a matter of organizational capacity and culture whether that price is deemed worth paying.

Jo DowlingSoka's "Refiguring Sex Work in the *Life of Theodoros of Sykeon*" analyzes the discourse of sex work in two related hagiographic accounts of the career of Theodoros of Sykeon (first half of the sixth to the

early seventh centuries). Theodoros's mother, Maria, and several other female relatives are said to have operated an inn located on an imperial road that ran through Galatia in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). In the longer version of the saint's life, composed after 641 CE, the women in Theodoros's family are variously characterized as "courtesans" (*hetairai*) or as engaged in the business of "fornication" (*pornike*). By contrast, a shorter version of the life does not use the more inflammatory term *pornike* in connection with Maria's occupation, even while it likewise presents Maria as a sex worker. DowlingSoka sets to one side the unanswerable question of the exact nature of the services offered at the inn, showing that women working in the hospitality industry could be praised as pious Christians or, alternatively, subjected to "slut shaming." These characterizations depend more on the aim of the author and the genre of the text than on whether or not the historical personages in fact worked in the sex trade. In the hagiographic tradition, the charge that Theodoros was the son of a "prostitute" served as a negative foil for the extreme ascetic discipline that he was to achieve in the course of his career. In this familiar plot, both sex work and sanctity are gender-coded: a woman working at an inn can easily be cast as sexually wanton, while the path toward sainthood often entailed the masculinization of a protagonist's interior affect and even their body itself. Even if little can be known regarding the "historical" Maria, DowlingSoka demonstrates that we can at least be sure that her life experiences—and those of other more and less privileged women like her—unfolded at the potent intersection of gender, class, and occupational identities. Moreover, in recovering the operation of these intersecting categories within Christian discourse, we can go some way toward recovering the historical logic of Maria's subjectivity as a person. DowlingSoka's study thus challenges us to normalize sex work as a topic of scholarly investigation, rather than unreflectively perpetuating the moralizing—and corrosive—language that both late ancient hagiography and much modern scholarship have traditionally adopted.

In a similar vein, Felege-Selam Yirga demonstrates that the language of heresy and schism, which scholars often bring to the task of reconstructing the complex process of negotiation that characterized the theological and ecclesiological conflicts among competing Christian groups, can distort the historical record. In "Apollinarios, the Chalcedonian Theodosian: Egyptian Religious Sectarianism in the *Chronicle* of John of Nikiu," Yirga investigates the account in John of Nikiu's late seventh-century world chronicle of the election more than a century earlier of the Chalcedonian Apollinarios to the

office of patriarch of Alexandria (551–570 CE). Historians have too often viewed this event through the warped doctrinal lens of the later rupture that irreparably split the Chalcedonian and miaphysite churches. But this anachronistic perspective oversimplifies the still incipient and highly mutable theological and ecclesiological divisions that existed in the time of Apollinarios and, in important respects, persisted into John's own day. Working with the medieval Ethiopic translation of John's *Chronicle*, which was transmitted neither in its original Coptic nor in Arabic, Yirga shows that Apollinarios's ascension to the see of St. Mark was brought about by a broad coalition of Chalcedonians and anti-Chalcedonians, who found common cause in checking the growing influence of apthartism during the reign of Justinian I. This theological position, which claimed that the body of Christ was divine and therefore incorruptible (*aphthartos*), was deemed extreme even by many fellow anti-Chalcedonians. Vacillations in imperial patronage further exacerbated tensions among erstwhile allies in the anti-Chalcedonian camp, thus creating space for a coalition between theological enemies that would become unthinkable in later centuries. In excavating sources from John's *Chronicle* that preserve memories of the still surprisingly inchoate doctrinal and institutional boundaries that separated rival Christian factions from each other in the sixth and seventh centuries, Yirga provides an illuminating case of how official accounts of religious groups and institutions are only ever partially successful in overwriting the complexity and contingency of historical processes. We should not be surprised, even if we may be bemused, by such endemic failures at subsuming the messiness of lived experience to a dominant script. ■