THE STUDY OF ELITES IN LATE ANTIQUITY

PETER BROWN

Travelling in Italy in 1929, the famous Irish author George Bernard Shaw once came from Venice to Ravenna. Confronted by the sixth-century mosaics of San Vitale and Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, he was studiously unimpressed. As he wrote to a friend:[1]

> The famous mosaics are very smart indeed, but soul-less after Torcello . . . There is not a scrap of magic about the Ravenna stuff . . . The figures are obviously fashionable relatives of Pontius Pilate doing their best to look like good Christians. As copied . . . later in St. Mark's in Venice they have become *real* saints.

When I first heard of this remark some forty years ago, in the late 1950s, I realized that, once again, I disagreed with my great compatriot. Coming, as Shaw had, from the ethereal, high Byzantine mosaics of Venice, I was stunned by the sheer sparkling color and the classical solidity of what I saw at Ravenna. The mosaics were delightfully different, in reality, from the impression of opulent, somewhat sinister gloom communicated by the black and white plates of the mosaics which served at that time to illustrate standard histories of the early middle ages.

From then onwards, "fashionable relatives of Pontius Pilate doing their best to look like Christians" were to be my way into late antiquity. My first major article on "Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman

---

1   G. B. Shaw to Sidney C. Cockerell, Ravenna 6 June 1929: Bernard Shaw, *Collected Letters 4: 1926–1950*, ed. D. Laurence (London 1988), 143.

Aristocracy" (Brown 1961) was, in many ways, my answer to Shaw. It was an attempt to explain, through a study of the process of Christianization in the fourth and early fifth centuries, how, after a further century and a half of Christianity and two generations of barbarian rule, these mosaics could still look so impenitently Roman.

In this, of course, I was not alone. At that time, the study of elites in late antiquity was effectively limited to the study of the senatorial aristocracy of the west. It was closely linked to what the Germans called the *Kontinuitätsproblem*: the problem of the continuity between the ancient and the medieval world in western Europe. It was the senatorial aristocracy that stood for the principle of continuity. Forms of Roman aristocratic dominance ensured the survival of a recognizably Roman social order for over a century after the fall of the Roman empire in the west. Christian members of that aristocracy (most notably Boethius and Cassiodorus) ensured the survival of much of classical, Roman culture for centuries to come in the "barbarian west."

Such concerns were close to the heart of my mentor, Arnaldo Momigliano, whom I first met in 1957. I noticed with pleasure that he began his memorable Italian Lecture for the British Academy (Momigliano 1955), on "Cassiodorus and the Italian Culture of His Time," by recommending a visit to Ravenna. His subsequent essay, in Italian, on the cultural activities associated with the Roman Anicii in the sixth century, a tentacular family group with representatives in both the eastern and western parts of the Roman world, was a model study of the tenacity and the wide horizons of an ancient *gens* that functioned as a true "multi-national company" in the culture and politics of a troubled age (Momigliano 1956). The study spoke with peculiar poignancy to Momigliano's own generation, recently dislocated by war and now condemned to watch in eastern Europe the systematic destruction of the pre-war social order. It was with Momigliano that I learned to live among those great lords and ladies, "who [so he wrote] moved with relative security in a world so far from secure" (Momigliano 1957.282).

But, like any student of ancient, medieval, or modern history who grew up in the Britain of the 1950s, I had, in any case, developed a sharp taste for elites. Whether it was Ronald Syme for Roman history, Bruce MacFarlane for the nobility of the later middle ages, or Sir Lewis Namier for the eighteenth century, the study of elites was in the air. It offered a way of understanding politics and society that promised to take the student behind the scenes. We would penetrate the façade of political strife and institutional structures to something more solid: to the human tissue of a governing class. Few of us had read the theories of Vilfrido Pareto on *The Rise and Fall of*

Elites. But we understood the thrill of inner knowledge that his analysis conveyed. In the words of Pareto's expositor, the student of elites was like (Zetterburg 1991.3):

> a sophisticated visitor to the theater of a histrionic drama
> who early discovers the whole plot while the rest of the
> audience still is misled by dramatic gestures, moralistic
> speeches, and the comings and goings of the actors.

Faced by the "histrionics" of conventional political and institutional history, we would not be duped. We did not need Pareto to say this for us. For who could have said it better than Ronald Syme (1939.7)?

> In all ages, whatever the form or name of government, be
> it monarchy, republic, or democracy, an oligarchy lurks
> behind the façade; and Roman history, Republican or
> Imperial, is the history of the governing class.

One did not have to love that governing class to study it with alert attention in any age. Indeed, a certain studious repugnance was *de rigueur*. There is a letter of Bruce MacFarlane in which he reacted violently to the antics of the British Establishment during the Suez crisis of 1956:[2]

> It did something that no event or combination of events
> have ever done to me before: it made me sick of history.
> How is it possible to devote one's life to a subject, the
> essence of which is the meanness of politicians?

What mattered, rather, was that, by the close study of an oligarchy, we could ensure that the members of a seemingly faceless group might take on human faces. Again, it was Syme who spoke to our generation (1939.18):

> As an oligarchy is not a figment of political theory, a
> specious fraud, or a mere term of abuse, but very precisely
> a collection of individuals, its shape and character, so far
> from fading away on close scrutiny, at once stands out,
> solid and manifest.

---

2   K. B. MacFarlane, *Letters to Friends, 1940–1966*, ed. G. Harriss (Oxford 1997), 138.

And so it was with the slow piecing together of the contours of the senatorial aristocracy of the west in the later empire. An inscription here, the name of an official addressed in a law there, the dedicatee of a literary work, the recipient of exhortation from a Father of the Church, a name in a chronicle, even, as comic relief, the working out of a horoscope in which high honors and exile for adultery alternate in the career of a nameless, ever-buoyant worthy—in fact, Ceionius Rufius Albinus: his anonymity having been penetrated, with predictable acuity, by Timothy Barnes (1975)— and, best of all, some last *senator*, lurking somewhere at the very end of the sixth century or the beginning of the seventh, whose figure is suddenly illuminated for us in the account of the foundation of a monastery or in the flash of a holy man's miracle (Barnish 1988.154): an entire aristocratic world, of whose importance and tenacity we had previously had little or no hint in the histrionic sources that narrate the end of the Roman empire in the west, was brought into existence by the attentive labor of the prosopographer.

What such methods could achieve was made plain in John Matthews' exuberant study of 1975, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court, A.D. 364–425*.[3] It is important to realize what a breakthrough that book was. It offered a new way of seeing the relations between politics, culture, and society in the later empire. Following only too faithfully the grain of contemporary narratives, Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* had concentrated attention on the imperial court. In Gibbon's opinion, it was the increasing isolation of the court, the high-handedness of its despotic rulers, and the political ineptitude of their more sheltered successors which cut the monarch off from society and thereby caused the fall of the western empire and the long decay of Byzantium.

What Matthews' book did was to sew the life of the court back into the tissue of western society by enabling us to follow the networks of patronage and alliance that linked the imperial court, at all times, to the regional aristocracies. It was this solid mesh of office, patronage, and landed wealth, created in the late fourth century, which enabled the aristocracies "to survive the decline of effective Imperial government and to fill their role, both in Italy and in Gaul, as the agents of continuity in the conditions of the fifth century" (Matthews 1975.387).

It was as "agents of continuity" that the elites of the Latin west had

---

3   Significantly, outstandingly, the best review of this book remains that of a medievalist, Wormald 1976.

come to claim our attention from the 1950s onwards and even earlier. It was really only a decade later, in the 1960s, that we turned to the Greek east to find a very different world. It takes some effort of the imagination, nowadays, to realize how *new* the study of the eastern empire was in the late 1950s and early 1960s, compared with the study of the Latin west.

There were good reasons for this western emphasis. The debate on the relationship between Latin Christianity and classical Rome was as old as the middle ages. How much of the old world had lived on in the new? For that reason, a "last Roman" such as Sidonius Apollinaris and his successors, the Gallo-Roman bishops of the fifth and sixth centuries, had been the subject of poems long before they drew upon themselves the attentions of the prosopographers. The Catholic Romantics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries already saw in them the tragic human link between the Roman past and the glorious future of Catholic Europe:[4]

> Comme au jour de scandales
> Un vieil évêque en sa ville assiégée
> Par des Alains, des Goths, ou des Vandales.
>
> Son esprit las porte un double fardeau.
> Derrière lui sur le mur noir et froid
> La vieille louve allaite les jumeaux
> Et devant lui Jésus meurt sur la croix.
>
> As in the day of scandals [the last days]
> An old bishop in his city, besieged
> By Alans, by Goths, or by Vandals.
>
> His tired spirit bears a double weight.
> Behind him, on the black, cold city wall,
> The Wolf of Rome stands, suckling the Twins;
> And before him Jesus dies on the Cross.

As undergraduates we may have allowed ourselves to be moved by such lines from Salomé's *Notre pays*. I was moved. But as graduate students, of course, we reacted with admirable prudery to so emotional a scene. We were determined to tell the story of the west in a less triumphal vein. But the vision of history summed up in Salomé's poem lingered. A poignant, largely

---

4   Salomé, *Notre pays*, cited by Christopher Dawson 1930.33.

clerical narrative of the Birth of Europe had effectively excluded the east, and, by excluding the east, it overlooked an entire *profane* world whose resilience and creativity we did not come to know until the 1960s, largely through the work of A. H. M. Jones.

Aristocracies were of interest to us largely because their existence had characterized large tracts of European history up to modern times and their study was well advanced by 1950. They were attractive, also, because they seemed to exist a little to one side of the state. Their study offered a refreshing alternative to the dominant, state-centered themes of political history as these were usually taught and studied. In the west, the peculiar interest of the senatorial aristocracy was precisely that it had managed to outlive the western empire by over a century. The state had withered and it had remained. We should remember that, in 1950, the late Roman state was not a pretty sight. Its demise could be treated as a foregone conclusion, even as no great loss. In his monumental work, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* of 1926, Mikhail Rostovtzeff had made this clear. In Rostovtzeff's opinion, what little of Roman civilization had survived the brutal upheaval of the third century did so at a cost so heavy as to repel the modern observer (1926.477–78):

> The emperors of the fourth century, and above all Diocletian, grew up in the atmosphere of violence and compulsion . . . They took their duties seriously . . . Their aim was to save the Roman Empire and they achieved it . . . They never asked whether it was worthwhile to save the Roman Empire in order to make it a vast prison for scores of millions of men.

They created a society, "crushed . . . in the iron clamp of castes separated from one another by barriers that could not be crossed" (Alföldi 1952.28).

Hence the excitement when Hugo Jones, having looked long and hard at the late Roman state and its impact on society, assured us that this was not the case at all. He did this in late 1958, in a public lecture delivered at the Warburg Institute as part of a series devoted to *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*. Speaking on the social background to the conflict, he ventured to suggest at the very end of his lecture, with the commanding authority of innocent common sense that made the utterances of this dry, even pedestrian lecturer invariably electrifying, that it was, if anything, the other way round (Jones 1963.34):

> There is much evidence which suggests that society was static in the second and early third centuries . . . Under the impact of the prolonged crisis of the mid-third century, this stable society was profoundly shaken. For a variety of reasons, men of all classes became dissatisfied with their hereditary position in life, and the conditions of the time gave opportunities for change.

There was plenty of room at the top for *novi homines*. And what *novi homines*! The newly formed senate of Constantinople included the sons of a cloakroom attendant in the public baths, a manual laborer, a clerk in a provincial office, and a maker of sausages. We relished the list, provided by Libanius in the course of an indignant speech, but read out by Jones with evident approbation. "Upward mobility" was as positively charged a theme in the very modern Britain of 1960 as the continuity of Christianity and classical culture had once been in earlier, more conservative decades. It was good to see that this bracing process happened in late antiquity, where we had least expected to find it. Keith Hopkins provided us with evidence for extensive upward mobility through education, in the case of Ausonius and his circle, thereby giving a further, social dimension to Henri-Irénée Marrou's magisterial *History of Education in Antiquity*.[5] He then went on to make the most repulsive figures of all in contemporary narratives of late Roman politics, the court eunuchs, gloriously intelligible in terms of the conflict between the emperor, the bureaucracy, and the traditional landowning elites (Hopkins 1963). Altogether, it was time to turn away from the sad west, dominated by a seemingly immobile aristocracy, to contemplate the more ebullient world of the Greek east.

This vision of an east Roman society set loose from traditional restraints was presented with almost nonchalant certainty by Jones in his lecture and in his subsequent (1964) monumental survey, *The Later Roman Empire*. The implications of such mobility were summed up clearly by one of the most vigorous and perceptive historians of the later empire, Santo Mazzarino. Speaking at the International Congress of Historical Sciences at Stockholm in 1960 (and in the presence of a large Soviet delegation), Santo Mazzarino pointed out that the true "revolution" of late antiquity did not consist in the social revolution that accompanied the end of slavery, as was

---

5 Hopkins 1961, 1965; Marrou 1948.

posited by Marxist scholars. It was, rather, a cultural revolution with impor-
tant social concomitants—*la democratizazzione della cultura*: a drastic
"democratization" of the culture of the elites was the hallmark of late
antiquity. Large areas of "vernacular," non-classical culture came to lodge at
the top of Roman society; and, at the same time, the cultural resources of the
elite became available, in religious, "democratized" form, to a wider section
of the population than ever before, largely through the agency of the
Christian church. In the same years, with his characteristic zest for the
concrete, Ramsay MacMullen drew attention, again and again, to those
elements in the culture of the elites of late antiquity that grew, for good or ill,
out of a rich humus of popular cultures long suppressed by classical Rome:
"They represent the upthrust of non-Greek and non-Roman elements through
an upper surface worn thin" (MacMullen 1964b.454). For him, they did
much to explain the cruelty, the showiness, and the obscurantism that
appeared to have taken possession of the late Roman governing class in the
course of the fourth century.

       Without the challenge and the support of Jones, Santo Mazzarino,
Hopkins, and MacMullen, I cannot think how my own work of the late
1960s and early 1970s could have begun. I would certainly not have reached
out as confidently as I did after 1967 to the insights of social anthropology if
I had not been challenged by the "dam break" in studies of late Roman social
history and, especially, of the social history of the eastern empire, first set in
motion by Jones. For it was against the background of growing awareness of
the tensions between fluidity and stability in the society of the eastern
empire that I was encouraged to turn, in a new manner, to the religious
history of the age. Sorcery, for instance, now struck me not as a symptom of
the fear of magic and of the flight from reason among the elites of late
antiquity, but, rather, as an indicator of the tensions between "achieved" and
"vested" status in a momentarily destabilized social hierarchy (Brown 1970).
In my *World of Late Antiquity* (1971b), both the text and the illustrations
show the extent to which I was indebted to the insights of Santo Mazzarino
and to the industry of MacMullen. In that book, the "democratization of
culture" was treated as a central aspect of the rise and establishment of
Christianity in the Mediterranean world.[6] As for "my" holy men, I loved
them so dearly because they were, for me, very much the spiritual homo-
logues of the *novi homines*, the energetic upstarts and the uncannily

---

6   See now Brown 1997.

unplaceable eunuchs, that I had learned to relish in a series of studies that revealed, each year, further aspects of the flexibility and staying power of the east Roman world.[7]

It is in these ways that the basic preoccupations and, then, the breakthroughs associated with the study of late Roman elites, which took place between the mid 1950s and the early 1970s, came to lure one young man from the relative security of the western empire of the age of Augustine to take the measure of the quality of an entire Mediterranean civilization in the period of late antiquity.

I say this not out of egotism, but simply so as to remind ourselves, at the outset, that we have all come a long way in the study of late antiquity, in east and west alike, since my *World of Late Antiquity* of 1971(b) and John Matthews' *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court* of 1975. It is important to be clear on this point. In the first place, historiography should be an exercise in gratitude. I hope I have made clear my debts to those scholars without whom I could not have begun my own work on late antiquity. And it is an exercise in gratitude because, if properly pursued, the historiography of any field involves a merciless mapping out of the outlines of our own ignorance at any given time. Much evidence which we now take for granted was simply not available to us as late as the 1970s. Thoughts that were unthinkable then have come to be thought with vigor and profit. Approaches to late antiquity that did not exist only thirty years ago have introduced new ways of reading well-known texts and have enabled us to mobilize whole bodies of evidence that we had once dismissed as unrevealing.

As historians, we are always like somewhat hurried but recurrent visitors to a great city. We discover a lot, with joy. But, on each occasion, we also miss a lot. A museum may not yet be open. A church may be shut. In our hurry to get to something exciting, we often fail to turn aside to explore some delightful quarter hidden behind narrow lanes. Research is altogether a rather sweaty, hassled business, marked as much by omissions and by the frustration of missed turnings as by discoveries. For that reason, we need a certain candor and courtesy when, after the excitement of exploring so many busy streets, we come together, as in this issue of *Arethusa*, to talk about our experiences. Each of us has missed something important at some time or other and needs to be told of it by others.

---

7 Brown 1971a. See now Brown 1998.355–58 and the outstanding articles collected in Howard-Johnston and Hayward 1999.

Nowhere is this more clear than in the study of elites in late antiquity. So let us begin, first, with the bad news. The study of elites has not got any easier. If anything, it gets more difficult every year. The nature of the subject makes this inevitable. In the words of a recent study of elites:

> Extreme centralization of power in [such] regimes was consequently linked to an elitist approach to analyzing them . . . The largest part of these societies remained in grey obscurity, only occasionally revealing bits of valid information about a social life distant from the centers of power. It is debatable whether this top-heaviness of research . . . completely distorted the picture of reality, however, it certainly contributed to an overestimation of the stability of these regimes, an underestimation of their factual diversity and a misjudgment of the extent of conflicts and cleavages dividing them . . . What is needed is an approach linking the top . . . with sub-elites and the population at large.

There is only one consolation for us in this austere opinion. It does not refer to the study of late antiquity: it is taken from Heinrich Best's introduction to a collection of essays on *Elites in Transition* in post-Communist central and eastern Europe.[8] If societies that are contemporary with us and are the close neighbors of many who study them can remain inscrutable in this manner, then we should not judge ourselves too harshly for our own failures and for the many lacunae in our own evidence.

So, let us make a start. First, let us be a little more precise. The social scientist will tell us, somewhat primly, that:

> Elite is a word which we use with facility in everyday discourse despite the considerable ambiguity surrounding it. In Wittgenstein's terms, it has the peculiar status of an "odd-job" word. Clear in what it signifies but ambiguous as to its precise referents . . . It locates agency in social events, by evoking the image of a ruling, controlling few, while being intractably vague. (Marcus 1983.7)

---

8   H. Best, "Introduction" to Best and Becker 1997.7.

In one respect, we can reassure the social scientist. One aspect, at least, of the elites of late antiquity is sharply characterized for us: they are *political* elites in that they derive their meaning from an imperial system.

If there is one change in the study of late antiquity which has slowly crept upon us, it is renewed respect for the late Roman state. It is no longer the totalitarian nightmare of Mikhail Rostovtzeff. But it was a formidable presence. As Christopher Kelly has written of the fourth century (1994.167):

> Despite obvious shortcomings . . . the creation of an extensive bureaucracy permitted the late Roman state to maintain a level of control over empire not reached until the eighteenth-century absolutisms of France and Prussia.

To read the chapters of Christopher Kelly (1998) on "Emperors, Government, and Bureaucracy" and of Peter Heather (1998) on "Senates and Senators" in the new thirteenth volume of the *Cambridge Ancient History: The Late Empire* is to be made aware of a renewed validation of the late Roman state itself as a major player in the game of social differentiation. It maintained the social hierarchy according to a set of unmistakable, new rules. Nobility could not exist without office; and office, even if often infrequent and minimal in the power that it conveyed on its holder, could not be had without an act of state. Thus Peter Heather describes the expansion of the senatorial order in the eastern empire in a manner that significantly balances the impression of unexpected mobility first conveyed in Jones' lecture of 1958. This was an expansion "aimed not at 'new men,' but at mobilizing the loyalties of the already rich and powerful" (Heather 1998.196). With three thousand new senators in each part of the empire, and some ten thousand jobs per generation also available to the inhabitants of each half, the "already rich and powerful" of the Roman world found themselves locked into a system of politically determined status as unbreakable and as extensive in its outward and downward reach as was the system of "jobs" and "interest" that produced the nasty but effective stability of Hanoverian England.

Contrasted with neighboring societies, whose aristocracies claimed to depend on blood alone—the *naxarars* of Armenia and the Great Houses of Iran—the late Roman order deliberately imposed upon its civilian elites a double disjunction between the quasi-automatic claims of birth and inherited wealth and the "true" nobility associated with education and

office.[9] Young men had to sit at the feet of males other than their fathers. Furthermore, they often did so in a city distant from their own, where they would have stood out in a strange environment—in Antioch, Athens, or Carthage—even more clearly as a distinct group, as *nobiles*, *eugeneis* in the making, aware of themselves as separate from all others, than would have been the case in the more cozy environment of their small hometown.[10] Grown men had to wait for some moment in their life when the emperor's hands would move (nonchalantly enough) across the page of a codicil of appointment. By opening a fine hair between the "natural" rights of birth and wealth and the "political" right of access to public service, this codicil spoke loudly of the element of *divina electio*—of imperial will—that remained an indispensable characteristic of the late Roman order (Näf 1995.32).

        To take a small but revealing example: perhaps the most lasting legacy of the "democratization of culture" by which administrative slang penetrated the language of the upper classes is the word *paganus*. It is only in the Latin west that this word took on religious meaning by being applied as a pejorative description to designate the "pagan" enemies of Christianity. In the eastern Mediterranean, in Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac, *paganus*, taken from bureaucratic Latin, retained its original meaning: a person without office and, therefore, without status. In the formal *salutatio* of the Jewish Patriarch, even scholars of the Law, if they lacked civic or imperial office, must go to the back of the line: for they were *pgny'* (Aramaic: *paganaie*, *pagani*).[11] Ultimately, through modern Greek, the Egyptian Arabic *baghanûs* came to mean, simply, a clumsy, clownish fellow (Krauss 1899.421). That is, in the region where the late Roman state remained most strong for the longest time, the word *paganus* was a perpetual reminder of the harsh imprint on society of a state that bid, constantly, through the privilege of office and the threat of exclusion, for ever greater loyalty and for evermore prompt service.[12]

        What matters, of course, is that the civilian elite never stood alone. In the last decade, I think that we have finally overcome what used to be the

---

9   See esp. Näf 1995, Schlinkert 1996, and now Laniado forthcoming.

10 Heather 1994a.184–86; see Bourdieu 1989.109–10, on elite education as a "ritual of separation."

11 Y. Shabbat 12.3, *Talmud Yerushalmi* 2.138: *bwlwwty' wpgny'*. Repeated in Y. Horayot 3.5, *Talmud Yerushalmi* 5.38: *blwwtyh wpgnyy'*.

12 Brown, s.v. "pagan," in Bowersock, Brown, and Grabar 1999.625.

greatest barrier of all to a full understanding of the elites of late antiquity. We have come to include the military. We should not underestimate the difficulty of this achievement. Our experience, in this respect, is similar to that of any researcher of modern elites. Members of truly effective elites are almost certain to be very busy and notoriously secretive persons. The researcher has to make do with the left-overs: "the marginally important or retired members are the most accessible as informants" (Marcus 1983.20). We have long been able to follow, through the writings of Symmachus and Libanius, the fortunes of those whose style of noble living included, in its very essence, the indefatigable wielding of the pen. The culture of the strong, silent men, the *viri militares*, who formed a parallel elite at court and in the provinces, does not yield itself so easily to us. Yet, when it does, what we have discovered in recent years has rocked the foundations of late Roman studies on many crucial issues. The *viri militares* (and the emperors who rose from their ranks) lived in a more complex world than we had thought, with a culture of its own. When, for instance, Neil McLynn turns to the religious background of the emperor Theodosius I, his study of the military culture of the fourth century leads him to draw conclusions very different from those which have usually been advanced to explain the nature of that emperor's reign. We can no longer speak of Theodosius as "a Spaniard." He was "an army brat." His culture was formed by apprenticeship rather than by education (even by a strong dose of archaic, paternal power). His Catholicism was not "Spanish" in the least. Rather it reflected the dour but latitudinarian Christianity of the camps (McLynn 1997a).

We have come to realize that the distinctive culture of the military elites had deeper roots and a far wider reach than we had once supposed. Michael McCormick (1989) has shown that the famous "consular" procession of Clovis at the basilica of Saint Martin of Tours in 507 drew on a century of ceremonial occasions staged for military men. Birgit Arrhenius (1985) has shown that the spectacular "barbarian" jewelry recovered from so many Merovingian graves was produced in Constantinople. It was part of the "barbarian *chic*" used by generations of hard-faced men, from all tribes and regions, bound to the emperor by oath "as to a God on earth." They formed a hierarchy of office that was as much a presence in late Roman society as was the better-documented hierarchy of the civilian elites. Guy Halsall (1992) has shown that the prestigious, armed burials associated with the famous *Reihengräber* of northern Gaul and the Rhineland were the product of a newly-formed elite in which Roman and "barbarian" alike had come to opt for the sword, rather than for the pen, as the symbol of their status.

These studies are like so many waves on the beach. None of them in themselves are thunderous. But they are sufficient, in their frequency, to have washed away almost every landmark that had once made the history of western Europe intelligible. They have eroded the clear distinction between two antithetical groups: Romans and barbarians. By implication, they have challenged our tendency to divide the history of Europe into two distinct periods: a "Roman" late antiquity followed by a "barbarian" Dark Ages. We can no longer organize our perceptions of the period around this convenient antithesis. In the 1950s, I was prepared, as befitted a young man, to doubt almost everything that my elders told me about the later empire. But some things at least were sacred: barbarians and Romans were separate. I never dreamed that I would read, in the glossary of terms that opens Patrick Amory's brilliant and remorseless study, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy 489–554*, the following entry, "*Goth* and *Roman*: ideologically loaded terms and thus not used in this book without at least imagined inverted commas."[13]

The dismantling of the notion of intrinsic "barbarian" identities has come to involve a reciprocal unraveling of the apparently more secure identity of the "Roman" elites who faced such persons. For someone who first looked out upon the late Roman scene in the 1950s, this involves a serious loss of innocence. It means that Sidonius Apollinaris, of all people, can no longer be trusted. He may not have been the elevating amalgam of last Roman and Catholic bishop that we met in Salomé's poem *Notre pays*. For, "notre pays," the late fifth-century Gaul from which France arose, was not as Salomé and others had imagined it to be: a region effectively controlled by a Catholic senatorial aristocracy all of whose members could be treated as "last Romans" of unswerving loyalty to the culture and political ideals of the declining Roman empire. It was, rather, a region marked by the presence of alternative political systems to that represented by the empire (Wickham 1984.18). Rome had already become replaceable. Weaving his way between Rome and the *viri militares*, now backed by energetic civilian helpers in the new "barbarian" kingdoms, Sidonius moved in a "Climate of Treason." He could be suspected by others of "un-Roman activities."[14] If, in

---

13 Amory 1997.xv; see now Pohl 1998.
14 Harries 1994, with Harries 1992 ("Sidonius Apollinaris, Rome, and the Barbarians: A Climate of Treason?") and Harries 1996; Teitler 1992. Many arguments concerning the actions of Sidonius depend on a chronology which is not yet certain: see the reservations of Gotoh 1997. The "climate of treason," however, is there.

the words of Renan, to be a nation involves "a daily plebiscite," then, in Gaul, to be "a Roman" involved just such voting to remain in or out on a year-by-year basis: in the late fifth century, *Romanitas* was a constructed identity that could now be abandoned with disquieting ease.

For the end of empire revealed the Achilles' heel of an elite system centered around the state. Such a system had acted like the Great Wall of China. It was designed as much to keep people *in* as to keep others out. Once the state had weakened or withdrawn (if only for a short period), "leakage" away from elite definitions once made by the late Roman state occurred at an alarming rate. Reading Esmonde-Cleary's *The Ending of Roman Britain* in 1989, I was struck by the ease with which a social structure intimately bound up with the Roman state vanished from the island once that state had withdrawn. Other elites seem to have emerged in Britain in the course of the fifth century, but they no longer left the same, overpowering traces of their eminence upon the archaeological record as had their "Roman" predecessors. C. R. Whittaker's book, *The Frontiers of the Roman Empire*, shows similar processes at work in northern Gaul and along the fringe of Africa. Here elite status emerged, in a very rough and ready manner, "from the violence of the countryside," as landlords became warlords (Whittaker 1994.257). Bert de Vries' study of the territories of Bostra and Umm el-Jimal tells the same story, with the significant exception that this case reminds us that the end of an imperial elite was by no means the end of the world for the region that it had once dominated. The late Roman settlements in Jordan in the late sixth century seem to be characterized by an uncanny calm: a dense network of prosperous villages from which the elites of the late Roman state had quietly withdrawn a generation before the Arab protectors of the frontier took over.[15]

We should bear this in mind when we approach sixth-century Gaul, the classic region of the *Kontinuitätsproblem*, where the senatorial elite could be assumed to have been most securely established. I do not wish to deny the achievement of Clovis and his successors in maintaining a late, late Roman social order. Ian Wood's challenging treatment of *The Merovingian Kingdoms* has shown that the Frankish kings maintained, as effectively as did their Mediterranean neighbors, a centripetal system of honors that linked

---

15 de Vries 1998. One of the few works to envision the scenario of the decline of an empire as a function of prosperity on its periphery is Bowersock 1991. Published in a collection that lies off the main track of late antique studies, the article merits attention.

the local aristocracies to the court (Wood 1994). Yet Gaul was not alone in Europe. Not every region had maintained its *ancien régime*. Part of the reason for the success of the Merovingian system may well have been anxious awareness of the many areas (known to the Franks and to their subjects) where, in the absence of strong state power, this system had not maintained itself: in Britain, in the vast and ominously silent spaces of North Africa (where Justinian struggled to restore it),[16] and, even, for long periods, in large parts of the Iberian peninsula (Collins 1983.32–58). In the words of Maurice Chevalier: "Old age is not so bad, if you think of the alternative."

I suspect that the sheer weight of research devoted by scholars such as Martin Heinzelmann to the Roman imperial and aristocratic origins of the *Bischofsherrschaften* of early medieval Gaul has endowed the Roman elites of post-imperial Gaul with a kinetic energy which they did not possess.[17] Such studies posit an almost unbroken continuity, at least within the Christian church, between the ruling elites of late antique and those of early medieval Gaul. The recent book of Karl Ferninand Werner, *Naissance de la noblesse* (1998), takes this emphasis on continuity to its furthest extreme: here we are introduced, with awed fascination, to a world where time seems to stand still in a long, long late antiquity that stretches from Constantine to the Capetians. Put briefly: I think that we lose something of our understanding of sixth-century Gaul if we see it, always, under the sign of unproblematic aristocratic dominance. We lose, above all, the sharp individuality of our principal source for the period: bishop Gregory of Tours.[18]

It is time to revise our estimate of Gregory. In the absence of direct control of military force in his own city, Gregory's *Bischofsherrschaft* remained, in the words of the Duke of Wellington reflecting on the battle of Waterloo, "a dam' close-run thing." We gain something from not seeing his work, as Martin Heinzelmann does, as an ambitious proposal for the ordering of Christian society on the already available bedrock of the bishops' lordship of the cities (Heinzelmann 1994.150–67). This interpretation of his *History* brings Gregory too far into the middle ages. It may be better to see him, rather, as closer to his contemporary, Gregory I. Like Gregory the Great, Gregory of Tours dearly wished for Christian *rectores* in whom personal virtue measured up to their office.[19] He had few illusions as to the

---

16 Camps 1984, Modéran 1996.
17 The classic study is Heinzelmann 1976. See now Fouracre 1999.146–48 and 164, on significant discontinuities between the sixth and the seventh centuries.
18 Brown, "Introduction," Mitchell and Wood forthcoming.
19 Markus 1997.26–33 and 59–67, Leyser forthcoming.

ability of his own class to produce such persons. The priest of Riom was a *senator*. It was taken for granted that he should have precedence and so should celebrate the solemn High Mass on Christmas Eve. But he was also an inveterate toper. He ended up in a heap in front of the altar, foaming at the mouth and "whinnying like a horse" (Gregory of Tours, *de Gloria Martyrum* 83). Gregory's work circles incessantly around the theme of the sharp *hiatus* between social status in the eyes of the world and merit in the eyes of God.

What mattered, for Gregory of Tours as it did for Gregory the Great, was the elite of God. Only God knew who they were, and often God was not telling. The people of Autun chose Simplicius because of his "rank in this world." But it was only when he was laid in his family tomb, and the skeleton of his wife reached over to embrace him, did the people know his secret. He had lived with his wife in perfect chastity since their wedding day. It was that hidden virtue, not his senatorial status, which gave Simplicius the merit in the eyes of God which, unbeknown to the snobbish inhabitants of Autun, had led to his election as their bishop (Gregory of Tours, *de Gloria Confessorum* 75).

The X-ray eye of Gregory is an aspect of his writings that has struck one of his most alert readers, Walter Goffart (1988.112–234). This X-ray shows the solid outlines of *merita*, seen from the outset by God alone and revealed only later to human beings—and often not until the bearers of these *merita* were dead. In comparison, the evanescent "flesh" of social status was a transparent shadow. Well-known political figures are shorn of their titles; blue-blooded bishops are brought low for their temerity.[20] Goffart sees in this the mind of Gregory the satirist, the heir of Juvenal, and the not unworthy precursor of Dean Swift (Goffart 1988.197–203). It might also be said to reflect an acute concern with the relation between power and merit which the bishop of Tours shared with his more meditative younger contemporary, Gregory the Great.

What is revealing about Gregory of Tours is that, in so many of his best stories, we hear a wider world speaking to and through the bishop. *Merita* revealed by strange events connected with the entombment of figures who had died over a century before Gregory's own times point to an imaginative play on the relation between high status and secret, "other-worldly"

---

20 Goffart 1988.161 on Parthenius. Compare the cool description of Leontius of Bordeaux by Gregory (*Histories* 4.26) with Venantius Fortunatus, who praises Leontius' *nobilitas* (*Carm*.1.15).

virtue taking place, over the generations, among the Christian *plebs*.[21] We are listening to snatches of a prolonged debate on the "true" status of a "true" elite that had been taking place, throughout the late Roman period, in a novel, religious institution whose rise to power in late Roman society still remains, for those of us who study it, almost too large to be seen. Let us therefore conclude with a consideration of the problem raised by the silent presence, on the edge of the elites, of an audience gathered over the centuries by the Christian church.

For consideration of the Christian church brings us to an as-yet-unresolved problem of late Roman social history: how to fit the elites into a wider and more differentiated view of late Roman society as a whole. The words of Heinrich Best, speaking of the elites of eastern Europe, pose this problem directly: "What is needed is an approach linking the top with . . . sub-elites and the population at large" (see note 8 above). These are words of unexceptionable methodological rectitude. But, in the study of the later empire, they are more easily said than done. How to do so effectively is a problem that we have not yet surmounted.

Modern studies on poverty and the care of the poor in late antiquity have posed this problem most acutely. It is agreed that one of the most decisive—or, at least, one of the most symbolically charged—shifts between the classical and the late antique worlds involved an imaginative revolution that affected the definition of society. The imperial elites and the elites of the cities came to see themselves as obliged to establish relations, through gifts of money and the provision of services, no longer to a clearly defined and overwhelmingly *urban* nucleus of their fellow citizens, but to the less exclusive category of the poor, in town and country alike. The *philopatris*—the lover of the hometown—of the classical age became the *philoptôchos*, the *amator pauperum*—the lover of the poor—of late antiquity and of the early middle ages.[22]

In following this change, we have been led to look down upon the late Roman scene from the viewpoint of the rich and of the bishops who administered the wealth of the church. And what we have seen is not quite what standard accounts of the society and economy of the later empire had

---

21 Cf. Gregory of Tours *Histories* 1.47 for a similar story from the distant past, the touching legend of the *Duo Amantes*. This may reflect an epigraphic theme, attested also in North Africa: Ladjimi 1990.
22 Patlagean 1977.17–35, 181–96, and 423–33, with Patlagean 1997 and Veyne 1976.15–183. On poverty in the west, see now Neri 1998.

led us to expect. We had been led to expect a view from the top of a precipice: the rich looked down on a society characterized by widespread pauperization, acutely polarized between the Haves and the Have-nots. In the words of Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, speaking of the early empire (1990.147):

> The vast riches squandered by the elite . . . and the contrast with the undoubted squalor experienced by the poor, tempt us into polarizing the culture of the elite and the culture of the masses. It is easy [he reminds us] (and perhaps [he adds, somewhat waspishly, but to the point] it is morally satisfying) to dramatize this contrast.

It is usually assumed that, by the later empire, the damage had been well and truly done. Apart from a few random cases of social mobility, the polarization of society between the Haves and the Have-nots was complete. The new concern for the poor is often presented as a function of this brutal situation. Those with wealth and office faced a society in which all other sources of respect had been washed away by a general impoverishment and by the ineluctable debasement of the status of the majority of free persons.

It is usually believed that Christian almsgiving arose in a world where, to quote the ringing, final phrases of Hendrik Bolkestein's fundamental study of *Charity and Benefaction in the Ancient World*, the Christian church found itself forced "to bring comfort to the death-bed of a declining world" (1939.484). We are told that to seek for a *Roman middle class* in the higher empire is a sufficiently absurd undertaking; to do so in the later Roman empire would be yet more perverse (MacMullen 1974.89 and 93–94). Yet we can no longer be quite so sure. For Wallace-Hadrill (discussing the spread of "luxury" middling-class houses at Pompeii and Herculaneum) continues, with a significant "but" (1990.147, see 147–49):

> But to fudge over the social diffusion of luxury is to miss something important both about the structure of Roman society and the way in which culture operated within that society.

If for "luxury" we substitute the word "religion," then I think that we may be on the trail of a "sub-elite" that lay beneath the elites of late antiquity much as the *bijou* houses of Herculaneum and Pompeii lay beneath the elites of the

early empire. Religion, in late antiquity, was not confined to the elites. Like "luxury" in an earlier age, it spread (indeed, it "luxuriated") on all levels of society. Certain considerations might lead us to this conclusion.

First, readers of Christian sermons on the care of the poor have developed a healthy suspicion about the highly polarized language in which Christian preachers presented their own society. These sermons tended to contrast rich and poor in such a way as to obscure all intermediate groups. The impression given by such preaching worked in the same manner as did Victorian vignettes of the life of the London poor. In the words of Gertrude Himmelfarb, these vignettes, "had the effect of pauperizing the poor by first creating the most distinctive, dramatic image of the lowest classes, and then imposing that image upon the lower class as a whole" (1973.2.726).

For when we turn to the day-to-day practice of the care of the poor in the Christian churches, we find not the "pauperized poor" of the sermons but rather the "seedy poor," the "shame-faced poor": widows, orphans, minor gentry down in their luck, victimized artisans in danger of impoverishment and loss of status.[23] It was these, and not the beggars, who clung like clumps of barnacles to the keel of every church, straining its budget, occasionally scraped off by reforming bishops, but usually back again in a short time.

Second, we have been challenged by the patient work of the *Prosopographie chrétienne*. The volumes appear slowly. Only those for Africa and the first part of the volume for Italy are available.[24] But, apart from these volumes, the works of Charles Pietri and the reports of Claire Sotinel (along with the work of A. Cecconi) on Italy have already given us a sufficient idea of the profile of the clergy of one region.[25] They are a dull lot. In Italy (as, also, in Africa), the personnel of the Church were characterized by an unrelenting middle-ness. They came from a background that is rarely higher than that of the small-town grammarians, whose *mediocritas* has been brilliantly evoked by Robert Kaster in his study of late Roman education (Kaster 1988.133). For most regions, the Gallo-Roman model of an aristocratic clergy must be abandoned.

We must be careful to remind ourselves that, when applied to the Christian church, the word "elite" is truly an "odd-job" word: "Clear in what

---

23 Krause 1995, with Schöllgen 1997.137–40 and Krause 1996.

24 Mandouze with de la Bonnardière 1982 and the late Charles Pietri and Luce Pietri 1999.

25 Most notably, Pietri 1978 and 1981, Sotinel 1997, and Cecconi 1997. See also Rebillard 1999.822–23 for the implications of this for our interpretation of the activity of the few better-known, upper-class bishops (such as Ambrose) in the fourth and fifth centuries.

it signifies but ambiguous as to its precise referents" (Marcus 1983.7). For, apart from the few rare figures (whose literary output represents some twenty feet of the *Patrologia Graeca* and the *Patrologia Latina*), the "elite status" of the clergy usually bore a metaphorical, not a real, relationship to the elite status of their ever-present, more substantial lay contemporaries.

The Christian church remained a "loose cannon" in the social structure of late antiquity. For, as Timothy Barnes makes plain, "The Constantinian reformation severed [the] immemorial nexus of religious authority, social status, and political power" (Barnes 1993.179). It produced a hero worthy of Barnes' sharp pen; Athanasius, a man whose dubious origins and consequent absence of elite socialization left him with, "a lack of inhibition which was to serve him well" (Barnes 1993.14).

From then onwards, nothing could be quite the same. Much of our study of the relations between the Christian church and the elites is the study, not of the unproblematic reassertion of the pre-existent social order in the upper echelons of the church, but, rather, of a series of ingenious attempts to close the stable door after the horse had bolted.

The Christian church, though not an "elite" institution, was firmly ensconced among the "sub-elites" of the cities and the countryside. The last decades have been marked by an astonishing increase in our knowledge of the churches of small towns and villages throughout the late antique Middle East. More and more mosaics and church silver appear in every country; and the Christian evidence is matched, in Israel, by equally thought-provoking synagogues. These discoveries have placed the "sub-elites" associated with the Christian church on the scene in far greater numbers than we had previously thought possible.[26] The same can be said of Egypt.[27] If we want to find a late Roman middle class, here is where we should look.

In death, also, middling persons are there in great numbers. The few stunning marble sarcophagi excavated at Old St. Peter's were sur-rounded by a sea of less distinguished graves whose marble plaques (and with them the story of an entire "gray area" of late Roman society) have been broken up and thrown away.[28] The same can be seen whenever intact

---

26 Mango 1992, Gatier 1994, Fine 1997. See now, in general, Maguire 1999.238–57 and Hirschfeld 1999.258–72.

27 Bagnall 1992.283–86, Martin 1996.653–62.

28 The scattered evidence is now ably exploited by Alchermes 1989. Galvao-Sobrinho 1995 is an excellent introduction. See also Heinen 1996.133–41 on the remarkable collection of one thousand sarcophagi and fragments of inscriptions, which are as yet unpublished, from the burial basilica now beneath the abbey church of Sankt Maximin at Trier.

Christian cemeteries have come to light in recent years: at Tyre (Rey-Coquais 1977) and, now, at Thessalonica.[29] The panels of the floor mosaics in Italy and elsewhere tell the same story. Panels of varying size tell of modest contributions from a wide range of local families (Caillet 1993). The *philoponoi* of the Greek east, confraternities of pious laymen dedicated to the upkeep of local shrines and to the care of the poor, speak of themselves as *lamprotatoi*, *clarissimi*. But they are a carpenter, a weaver, some local farmers, a cantor, and a stuffer of cushions (Sijpesteijn 1989). Altogether, what we have here is a social profile of Christian congregations not as different as we had once thought from the bustling and touchingly self-important *plebeii* of the higher empire.

But there is one crucial difference. The Christians claimed to look up to God rather than to their betters. As John Lendon reminds us in his book, *Empire of Honour* (1997.103 and 101): "The Roman world was . . . made up of countless communities of honour . . . [But] Their eyes were directed upwards at what would please and alert their social superiors." In all associations of the *plebeii*, we are faced with, "The domination of a community of honour by the values of the aristocracy" (Lendon 1997.102).

Yet this did not happen in late antiquity. For, by looking to God, late Roman Christians invested the life of their own, distinctly mediocre "community of honour" with the carapace of a strong sense of the sacred. Centered around sacred texts, Christian literacy received, in the words of Robin Lane Fox, a "divine whitewash." Here were texts that were considered to be above the minds of the powerful and the wise and yet could be memorized by heart and recited with authority by readers who could not even sign their own names (Lane Fox 1994.129). Only a certain amount of physical violence could be brought to bear on a bishop: he was a sacred person, a *reverendissimus vir*, whose status escaped precise official definition and so avoided most forms of official constraint (Mazzarino 1956.345–52). It is revealing to see how, after some uncertainty in the fourth century, the bodies of all clergymen came to be sheathed against physical punishment by appeals to a sacred status that cut across previous definitions of status.[30]

---

29 See the remarkable material presented at the Museum of Byzantine Civilization at Thessalonica, *Apo ta Ilysia Pedia sto Christianiko Paradeiso* (Thessalonica 1997), available as Kourkoutidou-Nicolaidou 1998.

30 It was a slow process, constantly cut across by the desire of members of the clergy to take advantage of the privileges and protections associated with their secular status: see Augustine *Ep*. 9*.1–2, *Bibliothèque augustinienne 46B: Lettres 1*–29***, pp. 43–44.

The bitterest tug of war of all between secular and sacred status tended to occur at an explosive moment: in the very midst of the mourning process. A newly-discovered sermon of Augustine shows how he had to speak to the congregation of a neighboring church to defend the decision of their bishop. A young man had died unbaptized. There was no way around it. He was popular. His family was rich. But he was not a *fidelis*. He could not be buried in the church where the Eucharist was celebrated.[31] We know of many such incidents. They show that, although frequently imposed on the local churches, the claims of the elite to privilege in burial had a stormy history. These claims were not taken for granted in a community characterized by firm, religious notions of the boundary between the faithful and the reprobate. The drift towards the flattening of hierarchies other than those imposed by a relation to the sacred—which privileged clergymen and ascetics—is a marked feature of the *ad sanctos* burials of the fifth and sixth centuries; and so is the disappearance of voluble grave epitaphs and of demonstrative burial monuments.[32] A certain leveling downwards and lack of differentiation seems to have set in. Bernhard Jussen has pointed to a significant element of *discontinuity* between secular *adventus* ceremonies in the fourth century and the *adventus* of relics and bishops in fifth and sixth century Gaul. The community is all there. But it is no longer a community described in terms of carefully distinguished *ordines* (Jussen 1998.114–19).

What was the upshot of this situation? It implied, among other things, a heightening of gender concerns, to which modern scholarship has devoted much alert attention. For we are dealing with a "sub-elite" caught in the travail of creating a new hierarchy within itself. The new hierarchy granted "elite" status to virgins and to celibate men and accorded formal respect also to widows. It was built upon the assumption of individual agency in relation to a sexuality shared by men and women. Members of both sexes could join the elite on the basis of a personal choice to abandon sex. A church divided between the *tria genera hominum*—the *continentes*, the *coniugati,* and the *viduae*, the celibate, the married and the widowed—

---

31 *Sermon Dolbeau 7: de sepultura catechumenorum*, ed. Dolbeau 1991, now in Dolbeau 1996.297–303.

32 Duval 1988. This would not necessarily exclude forms of elite expenditure that were remarkable at the time, but did not leave as permanent a trace on the archaeological record: expensive burial clothes, the giving of alms, and the provision of prayers: Effros 1997 and Wood 1996. Nor should we exclude the possibility of the continuation of demonstrative epitaphs on less enduring materials than stone, i.e., inscriptions on frescoes or painted on wood.

was no longer a society of Roman *ordines*. Each "state of life" was held to have involved a moral choice informed by Christian teaching: a choice to marry, not to re-marry, not to marry at all. The creation of this ordering was, as Bernhard Jussen puts it, "a history of the sermon and its effectiveness" (1992.42).

Such a view of the Christian community assumed, also, that women would make their own sacred compact with God, thereby acquiring *merita* in the eyes of God (to return to the phrase used so frequently by Gregory of Tours). Their *merita* placed pious women among *His* elite on a par with any man, clerical or lay. As a result, we find that even bishops who came from the elite stepped onto slippery ground when they faced the Christian *plebs*. Their most important earthly function within the Christian congregation was the offering of effective prayers to God on behalf of themselves and others. Yet they did not enjoy an unchallenged monopoly over the power of prayer. For it was precisely in the vital area of intercession to God that the bishops and clergy were most open to challenge by "voices from the floor." In an article that goes some way to challenge the views of Martin Heinzelmann, Bernhard Jussen pointed out that the position of the bishop as leader of the community in Gaul depended less on his aristocratic pedigree and more on his ability to act as an expert in the sacred. It was control of the liturgy that "ennobled" a bishop, making him an aristocrat in the eyes of his followers, and not *vice versa* (Jussen 1998.85–105). But if this was so, then the bishops faced a problem. They could never claim to be the only experts in prayer. At the end of the fifth century, bishop Mamertus of Vienne was praised by his episcopal colleagues for having instituted, in the face of opposition from a conservative, "senatorial" town council, a spectacular new communal liturgy of Rogations.[33] Yet, a generation earlier, when Attila swept into Gaul in 451, it was Saint Genovefa and the *matronae* of Paris who created their own liturgy of supplication, crowding into the city's baptistery for night-long vigils of prayer. Like Mamertus, they expected to be heard by God on behalf of the community. Like the Rogations organized by Mamertus, their vigils functioned to allay panic and to check the desertion of the city by its upper-class inhabitants. Genovefa was almost stoned as a *pseudoprophetissa* for her pains.[34] But her case makes Mamertus' initiative seem that much less

---

33 Avitus of Vienne, *Homilia in Rogationibus*, ed. Seeck 1883; see Jussen 1998.110–11 and Nathan 1998.

34 *Vita sanctae Genovefae* 3.10–11, ed. McNamara et al. 1992.23. On the crucial importance of the power of intercessory prayer, see now (for the eastern empire) Rapp 1999.

original. As arbiters of the sacred, the enterprise of the upper-class bishops of Gaul consisted in harnessing for their own purposes a religious atmosphere in which the *merita* of pious women, and their powers of intercessory prayer, were by no means regarded as inferior to those of men.

What does all this mean for the study of elites in late antiquity? We have not simply added one further elite to the top of Roman society, to take its place alongside the senators and the *viri militares*. Rather, I would suggest that the very "mediocrity" of the Christian church gave it an amphibious quality. The Church stood at the joining point between the elites, the sub-elites, and the humbler masses (Averil Cameron 1991.155–221). It could bring together the entire middle of late Roman society and could create a further hierarchy, rendered resistant to outright aristocratic co-optation by contact with the sacred. Such a body provided the elites with, as it were, a sociological "urban lung"—a place of maneuver and a refuge. In many areas, it was the more humdrum world of the church which swallowed up the local aristocracies, and not *vice versa*. There is still room for yet another round of regional studies of the relation between the Church and the local elites (such as Arnaldo Momigliano recommended as long ago as 1958, when he introduced the series of lectures in which Hugo Jones spoke) that takes cognizance of the more complex picture of late Roman society suggested by so much recent evidence (Momigliano 1963.14).

In this case, the model provided by contemporary eastern Europe might be of help. Here we see former "political" elites drawing on their own, considerable resources, to "buy into" the new, world-wide system of the free market. In this process, many prejudices have to be abandoned and much laundering of the past has to take place (Toneva 1997.105). That a relatively stable "grand coalition" of former elites and new businessmen should emerge is suggested, by Elemér Hankiss, as perhaps the best that can be hoped for in most post-Communist countries (1990.234–65). The Gallo-Roman bishops might stand as the representatives of such a "grand coalition." A similar "grand coalition" seems to account for the stability of the central regions of the eastern empire in the late fifth and sixth centuries, as civic and episcopal elites merged in so many cities (Whittow 1990). In Italy, by contrast, the lay elite did not avail itself in time of these resources. Senators remained too grand. They were content to name the clergy and did not join them. They paid for their mistake. There were few of them left by the end of the sixth century (Barnish 1988.151).

On the frontier of the eastern empire, the density of churches in Jordan and Syria tells another, different story (Schick 1995). These churches

did not stand out, in the towns and villages, as the temples had once done. They were solid buildings, wrapped around by domesticity. The sturdy houses of the residents nestled up against them. They stood in the middle of small, prosperous communities of small men, in a region from which the elites had silently withdrawn (de Vries 1988). Yet, to enter the church of St. Stephen at Um ar-Rasas was to enter a spectacular space. It was to walk on an entire visual map of a late antique regional society, treading on panels that showed a network of neighboring cities, each with their salient monuments delineated.[35] This mosaic dates from as late as 718 A.D., that is, almost a century after the withdrawal of the Christian empire, once the source of all honors, from the Middle East. This splendid mosaic was laid down in the last generation of the Ummayad, Muslim empire. It was contemporary with the Venerable Bede and with the rise of the Pippinids in northern Gaul. By that time, few "fashionable relatives of Pontius Pilate" lingered in the west. But the village Christians of the east, with no senators to their name, would survive in enclaves up to this day. It is with this reminder of the tenacity of little men, whose faces we have only begun to glimpse in ever greater numbers, that I would like to end an article devoted to urging ourselves on, once again, to continued study and enjoyment of the elites of late antiquity.

Princeton University

---

35 Piccirillo, Alliata et al. 1994; see now Bowersock 1998.697–99.