CHAPTER 7

Conclusions
Popular Culture and the End of Antiquity?

This concluding chapter begins with one final anecdote, once more from the *Life* of Caesarius of Arles.[1] The story begins with some wild boars that used to gather in fields belonging to Caesarius' monastery, in the *suburbium* of Arles (*in agro monasterii suburbano*).[2] The local Gothic commanders and other soldiers (*comites civitatis* [sc. *Arelatensis*] *vel reliqui militantes*) liked to come out to hunt the boars, and they forbade the estate workers (described only as *homines domus*) from working in the fields. If they tried to work in the fields anyway, the hunters would beat them violently and even killed some of them for driving the animals away.[3] The estate workers did not wish to put up with this brutal treatment and came to see Caesarius, as their master (*ipsum domnum*), who let them voice their complaints. Having heard their account, Caesarius prayed to God and asked that the boars never enter the fields again: this prayer was successful, we are told, and the boars never returned. This is undoubtedly a rather odd, and not entirely satisfying, miracle story, but it does contain several elements that can be teased out in order to consider, one last time, the key themes and transformations we have looked at over the course of the previous chapters.

First of all, the often brutal reality of the changing power structures in this period comes to life, personified by the villains of the story, identified with the Gothic establishment of Arles (whether Visigothic or Ostrogothic we cannot be sure).[4] We might mind find the bishop's miracle rather disappointingly undramatic: he does not smite the murderous hunters down but instead banishes the boars, thus removing the occasion for the vicious trespassers to intrude upon the land. (In Caesarius' defence, we might recall that he often found himself in a highly sensitive position as

[1] *V. Caes.* 1.48. [2] Presumably the female monastery of St John.
[3] *eos caede mactabant . . . 'et interficiunt nos'*, *V. Caes.* 1.48.
[4] Specifically by the complainants, as quoted: *comites et Gothi et diversi venatores.*

bishop of Arles, and needed carefully to negotiate his relations with each successive regime he experienced while in office.) Next, the location of the anecdote – an agricultural estate owned by a monastery attached to the church of Arles – recalls the incremental growth of ecclesiastical and monastic institutions as landowners and the growing prominence of these institutions across urban, suburban and rural landscapes alike. As an aside, it is also interesting that the location of the story is neither quite urban nor quite rural but rather *suburban*. While the precise location of the estate is unknown,[5] it does speak to the blurred boundaries of the city of Arles and its *territorium*. These kinds of blurred boundaries have been moot, if sometimes only implicit, in much of what I have considered, not least in the abiding episcopal concern about prevailing *rusticitas*.

A blurring of boundaries also affects our understanding of the *homines domus*, whose precise status is unclear – that is, whether they are slaves, *coloni* or even free tenants – a state of affairs that is entirely characteristic of the sources we have considered throughout the book.[6] We have indeed already seen that Caesarius owned and bequeathed slaves, but we have also seen how even *non*-slaves were persistently treated in a way traditionally reserved for the enslaved. Regardless, here we see the estate workers getting together as a collective to ask their *dominus* to intervene in order to protect them from ill-treatment. This in itself is familiar: late antique sources provide lots of similar stories,[7] as well as accounts of bishops and holy men acting to protect vulnerable members of the rural non-elite *from* landowners.[8] In this particular account, the bishop/holy man *is* the landowner, but he himself has to negotiate (in miraculous form on this occasion) with the secular authorities, whose military power is strongly foregrounded. This story therefore presents an interestingly knotty version of the triangle which has shaped much of our previous discussion: between ecclesiastical elites, secular elites and non-elites. But where is the popular culture in all this? Once more we have to access the agency of the vaguely described non-elite via a clerical text. Nonetheless, this is an enticing episode, which Sebastian Heath suggests offers 'an instance of a rapidly changing countryside where there is some role for communal action by rural workers'.[9] I shall go on to flesh out and nuance this interpretation, which speaks to the value

[5] The site of the estate cannot be located; Delage suggests it could be identified as the *agellus Anchar*ianus mentioned in Caesarius' will, but this is only speculation: Delage 2010: 214.
[6] See pp. 83–4. [7] See Grey 2011: especially 121–47.
[8] Such as the well-known case of the oppressed tenant Faventius, whose cause was taken up by Augustine: *Ep.* 113–16.
[9] Heath 2004: 138.

of an approach foregrounding popular culture – in particular, using a model of popular culture that comprises strategies of both negotiation and contestation. In what follows, as well as recapping the main historical developments covered in this book, I shall return to the key themes and concepts at its heart, including the core question of the nature of the connection between popular culture on the one hand and the 'end of antiquity' on the other.

Can a popular culture approach enable a fuller understanding of the relationship between non-elite agency and historical change? I began this book by presenting my model of ancient popular culture and arguing for its validity and utility in understanding social and cultural history. I also raised the question as to whether we can also see popular culture *itself* as a *motor* of historical change in the transformation of the ancient world. It will be helpful here to return to some of the interpretations and models offered by other scholars that I have been considering over the previous chapters. Reflecting on the question of the 'transformation' of the Roman landscape in late antiquity, Kim Bowes and Adam Gutteridge ask provocatively why scholars are so 'obsessed' with change, and suggest: 'The way forward, surely, is to accept that things are always in flux and are subject to both change and continuity, and to remove the historiographic obsession with finding the edges of things (both origins and ends), focussing instead on producing coherent analyses evaluated on their own terms.'[10] There is indeed an important argument, at least when it comes to the lives of peasants, for a different approach to temporality and change, as indeed pursued by Bowes in her more recent work on the 'Roman Peasant Project', where she stresses the 'intensive' nature of peasant temporality.[11] The changes we saw in the countryside around Arles, as discussed in Chapter 3, were in one sense part of a familiar pattern whereby periods of settlement, re-settlement and production were often short-lived. These patterns of change were also often intensely local. However, even micro-regional developments also both reflected and in turn impacted upon longer-term shifts: there *was* change. The peasants of late antique southern Gaul inhabited a social and economic environment that was undergoing a substantial transformation, even if the full implications of this, as laid out so fully by Chris Wickham in *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, would take longer to come into effect in our region than elsewhere in the West. While our individuals and small communities can seem to get lost across this *longue durée*, it is helpful to return to the suggestion of Leslie Dossey, made in respect of North Africa but clearly more broadly applicable, that

[10] Bowes and Gutteridge 2005: 407. [11] Bowes 2020: 633.

we should see in the material culture of the countryside 'thousands of small acts of entrepreneurship and aspiration'.[12] In the conclusion of the 'Roman Peasant Project', Kim Bowes and Cam Grey argue: 'In each case a collection of local phenomena combined with more distant forces to produce a particular set of circumstances. Our peasants were subject to these circumstances, but they were also agents generating them.'[13] This same argument applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the urban non-elite, taking advantage of shifting political and economic structures across the cities of the late antique Mediterranean to assert their own agency, as shown in the work of Julio Cesar Magalhães de Oliveira.[14]

Across Chapters 2 and 3 I considered key changes that were taking place in southern Gaul in late antiquity as contexts for both the construction and expression of popular culture. While the cities of the region were undergoing substantial alterations in terms of their physical and built environment, they were at the same time the sites of a striking *ideological* transformation. Changes in the urban landscape, in particular the desuetude of many of the traditional public buildings of the city, including the spectacle venues where top-down organized public entertainments were held, were highly significant. These shifts prompted the development of a more do-it-yourself and indeed genuinely *popular* culture, better suited to the current conditions. Intrinsic to and hand in hand with this development, traditional modes of civic euergetism and governance were shifting. Alongside the demise of the traditional curial class, the rise to power and influence of the bishop in turn brought about new opportunities for the urban non-elite to make their voices heard.

The picture of the countryside, meanwhile, was one not just of ongoing change but also of striking, micro-regional diversity. This comprised new patterns of settlement involving population movements and the growth of new centres of consumption as well as production. These developments can be seen alongside the resilience of the villa, a resilience that was, nonetheless, accompanied by substantial alteration and indeed adaptation: facets of this change are subject again to variation, meaning that a single interpretation or indeed scholarly consensus remains out of reach. While there are signs of increased autonomy for some of our rural populations among these changes, late antique *domini* were still present in much of the landscape. At the same time, there was an opposing drive towards increasing oversight, or indeed control, on behalf of the late antique church. The late antique church sought – often successfully – to take advantage

[12] Dossey 2010: 93. [13] Bowes 2021: 637. [14] Magalhães de Oliveira 2020.

of changing patterns of social organization and of the opportunities these changes brought in terms of both ideological and economic oversight of the countryside. For instance, we saw Hilary of Arles traipsing across his *territorium* (just as Caesarius would do later) and showing both a pastoral and economic interest in local practices and enterprises: baptizing shepherds and assisting with salt production. Here, as elsewhere, the church would have undoubted success.

The next chapters explored these themes through a series of thematic case studies. Chapter 4 focused on the ideological claims of the church, looking in particular at the sermons of Caesarius. He is indeed a dominant figure throughout much of the book – albeit perhaps as villain rather than hero; it is with a characteristically apt turn of phrase that Peter Brown referred to Caesarius' 'unceasing voice'.[15] We saw his persistent attempts to define, mould and control *unauthorized* culture, often in a triangular relationship with the secular elites, who were his primary audience. He combined traditional elitist models and concepts with a new ascetic and universalizing ideology, using the concept of *rusticitas* in particular as a tool in his attempts to impose social control. While his powerful if derivative rhetoric sought totalizing control over his congregations, the evidence – not least that of the manuscript tradition – shows that his success in his own time was far from complete. For this study it was crucial to place his sermons firmly in the context of complementary as well as opposing material, bringing in other voices from different times and places where necessary.

In Chapter 5, I used a model of lived religion – closely analogous to that for popular culture – in order to develop a thicker description of the social and cultural history of the late antique countryside. This showed that the religious changes of late antiquity should not be understood as top-down 'christianization', but involved ongoing adaptation and appropriation at all levels. Lived religion was constructed collaboratively in its local landscapes, shaped by structures and inequalities of power and status as well as by the features of these environments themselves, as explored through ritual practices associated first with the harvest-time festivities of John the Baptist and then with protection against hail. Finally, in Chapter 6 an extended case study of the festival of the Kalends of January provided the most sustained opportunity yet to see late antique popular culture in action, in both town and countryside. We saw it operating in the open spaces of the late antique city, in the rituals of the agricultural and

[15] Brown 2003: 151–2.

calendrical year, in song and dance and in the *unauthorized* speech and movements of the men and women of the non-elite. Town and country came together and to life in a whole range of generally do-it-yourself practices, whereby unequal relationships were tested as well as celebrated in rituals of exchange and hospitality alike. The resilience of popular culture hence came to the fore, while the relentless critique of Caesarius and his colleagues went largely unheeded, even as it was repeated and ossified across our early medieval sources.

Given these conclusions, where are we now? Aspects of the study of late antique popular culture are certainly paradoxical at first glance. Clerical constructions are full of clichés and stereotyping, constructed from centuries of 'cut and paste', as well as being subject to the preconceptions of later editors of clerical texts. Many of our literary 'sources' were aimed primarily at an elite who were living less and less like a traditional Gallo-Roman elite. However, to return to the model of Stuart Hall with which I began, popular culture was *itself* constructed in the very crucible of opposing forces and indeed discourses – including the repetitive discourses of the late antique and early medieval church. What we have seen was a continuing and developing popular culture on the one hand, but also a continuing, and evolving, attempt to de-authorize this culture on the other: we must understand popular culture as a *dialectic*.

Next, the concept of the 'democratization of culture', as outlined at the start of the book, provided another way to approach the question of how popular culture can constitute a *motor* of change. While the religious transformations of the period (often understood under the rubric of 'christianization of culture') had a major impact on popular culture, popular culture itself had an important and formative impact on these religious developments in a reciprocal (and hence again dialectical) relationship. The church developed many of its most successful and permanent cultural forms by borrowing *from* popular culture, but also did so not least in order *to oppose* popular culture – sermons, song, forms of metre – as well as borrowing widely from existing modes of culture, ritual and expression, which we saw practised in both town and country. A top-down 'christianization' – as imagined and constructed by late antique clerical elites, and later historians alike – never took place.

Even seeing the history of popular culture as a dialectic does not entail a crudely binary account of social and cultural change. The interests of 'the church', or even of individual bishops, were certainly not identical to those of elites, hence the forms of triangulation we have encountered so consistently. Bishops demanded a level of social and ideological control over their

congregations that the landowners in their congregations had never dreamt of with regard to their own clients and dependants. In southern Gaul, as elsewhere, the church was concerned to retain (or gain!) control over church buildings built by members of the secular elites on their own land, as well as Christian cult practices that took place there. Repeatedly, in southern Gaul, as elsewhere, bishops harangued landowners for failing to police the religious practices of their dependants. Civic and imperial elites across the late antique Mediterranean, meanwhile, were seemingly happy to allow or even foster the celebrations of the Kalends of January while the church was resolutely opposed.

Further to the rejection of a naively binary approach, not all the practices discussed under the rubric of popular culture are limited to a particular, 'popular' socio-economic cohort. Singing, dancing, gossiping and watching the mimes – these were widely shared practices. Christian discourse in late antiquity was universalizing in scope but remained deeply imbued with inherited class- and gender-based prejudices. We saw how Caesarius, in particular, should be placed in a long tradition of elite discourse which persistently sought to *de-authorize* certain forms of speech and behaviour, recalling our notion of popular culture as *unauthorized culture*. What is striking in our period is the new level of intensity and urgency of this project. Caesarius was responding to the changing social and economic landscape around him and a desire to keep *rusticitas* in its rightful place was certainly one of the factors at play. Furthermore, seeing popular culture as comprising more broadly shared practices is fundamental to the study of 'lived religion', as we saw – for example, using whatever protective tools were available to protect one's livelihood against environmental hazards. However, socio-economic context was crucial in determining the experience, meaning and reception of this cultural 'work'. This was most obvious when looking at how the religious practices of individuals could be seen very differently, by both clerics and secular authorities, according to the social and legal status of the subjects involved.

Ultimately, the paradox remains – as others have already noted – that the further members of the non-elite lived from elite control, the less we are likely to know about them and hence the less we are able to assess their role in historical change or indeed continuity. The challenge that remains for us is to continue to see history as a dialectic, as a dialogue, indeed a conversation with many voices. Some of these voices – such as that of Caesarius – were of course inscribed with much more power: the job of the historian is to deconstruct the processes by which this happened. Giving voice to the voiceless is a more difficult task. The *homines domus*

featured at the start of this chapter, who were being violently oppressed as they sought to go about their work, are of course ventriloquized by the authors of the *Vita Caesarii* (just like the Kalends revellers and the peasants who told tall stories about cloud driving that we met earlier in the book). The story nonetheless speaks to the *real* experience of members of the non-elite – peasants, artisans, the unfree and the not-very-free alike – who we can glimpse using the strategic tools at their disposal to make their living, navigate the structures around them and indeed play their own role in the broader processes that represent both continuity and change at what is for us the 'end of antiquity'.