

*Among slave systems: a profile  
of late Roman slavery*

## DEFINING SLAVERY AND SLAVE SOCIETIES

In late Roman Antioch, a Christian preacher named John Chrysostom found himself trying to explain the origins of slavery to his congregation, a problem which he knew “many” were “eager to understand.”<sup>1</sup> If his audience hoped for a theoretical disquisition, they got instead a stern lecture.<sup>2</sup> The theme gave Chrysostom the occasion to criticize the everyday hypocrisy of the members of his flock, who dragged an army of slaves behind them into the baths or the theater, but never into church. The slave-owner, he implored, should be the steward of the slave’s soul. To illustrate the network of obligations between master and slave, the preacher turned to a familiar political metaphor. “Each house is like a city, and every man is the ruler in his own house. This is obviously true among the rich households, in which there are farms and overseers, and rulers over the rulers. But I say that even the household of the poor man is like a city. For in it there are also rulers. For instance, the man rules his wife, the wife rules the slaves, the slaves rule their own wives, and again the men and women rule the children.”<sup>3</sup>

Chrysostom’s sermon is a glimpse of Mediterranean society in the late Roman empire. The baths and theaters, where masters flaunted their wealth

<sup>1</sup> Ioh. Chrys. In Ephes. 22.2 (PG 62: 157): πολλοὺς . . . καὶ μαθεῖν βουλομένους. The careful work of Mayer 2005 has demonstrated the uncertain basis of the traditional assignments of dates and places to Chrysostom’s sermons. The homilies on Ephesians have been assigned to Antioch (p. 258), but this is now less than definite (p. 471). Maxwell 2006, 94, on Chrysostom’s responsiveness to his audience.

<sup>2</sup> Klein 2000 and 1988; Kontoulis 1993; Jaeger 1974, esp. on theological and metaphorical aspects of slavery in the late antique fathers.

<sup>3</sup> Ioh. Chrys. In Ephes. 22.2 (PG 62: 158): Πόλις ἐστὶν ἡ ἐκάστου οἰκία, ἀρχῶν ἐστὶν ἕκαστος τῆς ἑαυτοῦ οἰκίας. Καὶ ὅτι μὲν τοιαύτη ἡ τῶν πλουτούντων, εὐδηλον, ἔνθα καὶ ἀγροὶ καὶ ἐπίτροποι καὶ ἀρχόντες ἐπὶ ἀρχουσιν. ἐγὼ δὲ καὶ τὴν τῶν πενήτων οἰκίαν φημὶ πόλιν εἶναι. Καὶ γὰρ καὶ ἐνταῦθα εἰσὶν ἀρχαί. οἶον, κρατεῖ τῆς γυναικὸς ὁ ἀνὴρ, ἡ γυνὴ τῶν οἰκετῶν, οἱ οἰκέται τῶν ἰδίων γυναικῶν. πάλιν αἱ γυναῖκες καὶ οἱ ἄνδρες τῶν παιδῶν. cf. Nagle 2006 and Hasegawa 2005, for these metaphors. Holman 2001, 1–6, for πένης. Mayer 2006. Other “poor” slave-owners: Ioh. Chrys. In Philip. 2.5 (PG 62: 197); Ioh. Chrys. In Coloss. 1.4 (PG 62: 304).

in slaves, were the façade of an exuberant urban culture, poised carefully amidst the much vaster world of agrarian society.<sup>4</sup> Although urban in its cultural orientation, the late Roman aristocracy was, to an exceptional degree, a market-oriented aristocracy whose power derived from the ability to capitalize on land and labor.<sup>5</sup> Wealth was earned by selling wine, grain, oil, and textiles in the markets created by town populations. Yet, as the sermon shows, late antique society was a traditional society, and the household remained the fundamental unit of property and labor, production and reproduction. For Chrysostom, the rich household was an agro-commercial enterprise, just as the “poor” household was a way of organizing life’s material burdens. The household and the city, the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural: as Chrysostom saw, it was a world unthinkable without slaves.

A history of late Roman slavery should begin by confronting the question which Chrysostom managed to dance around: what is slavery? The Roman jurists defined slavery as “an institution of the law of nations, by which one person is subjected against nature to the *dominium* of another.” Florentinus, the lawyer who authored the definition, then indulged in some speculative philology. “The name ‘slave’ (*servus*) derives from the fact that commanders sell captives and by this custom ‘save’ (*servare*) them rather than kill them.”<sup>6</sup> The ideology of conquest retained great purchase in the late empire, but we need not take these statements at face value.<sup>7</sup> With extreme economy, the Roman legal description of slavery moved from myth to reality. Slavery was conceived of and justified as the outcome of military victory, allowing masters across the empire to participate in the superiority of Roman arms over the barbarian chaos.<sup>8</sup> The Romans had a remarkable capacity to imagine their world in militaristic terms.<sup>9</sup> The folk etymology of the “slave” as the spared war captive, the living dead, symbolized the master’s claim to the slave’s entire existence, body and soul.<sup>10</sup> But ultimately, even this loaded ideological definition could not avoid the fact that the spared

<sup>4</sup> Urbanism, Lavan 2001; Liebeschuetz 2001; Brogiolo and Ward-Perkins 1999; Rich 1992; Lepelley 1981a. For a quantitative approach, Alston 2001. Jongman 2003, explores the relationship between slavery and urbanism.

<sup>5</sup> Wickham 2005a, esp. 155–6.

<sup>6</sup> Dig. 1.5.4–5: *servitus est constitutio iuris gentium, qua quis dominio alieno contra naturam subicitur. servi ex eo appellati sunt, quod imperatores captivos vendere ac per hoc servare nec occidere solent.* cf. Dig. 50.16.239.1; Inst. 1.3.3. The etymology was fictitious: Wieling 1999, 4, 42.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Ambrosiast. Comm. Coloss. 4.1–3 (CSEL 81.2: 202); Aug. Civ. 19.15 (CC 48: 682–3).

<sup>8</sup> Household objects such as lamps celebrated the control of barbarian slaves: Lenski 2008, 84.

<sup>9</sup> McCormick 1987. <sup>10</sup> cf. Dig. 50.17.209.

victim of Roman conquest was *sold*. For, in the marketplace, master and slave truly met, and the ideology of conquest was fleshed out in the form of human bodies for sale.

The essential characteristic of slavery, distinguishing it from all other human relationships, is the commodification of the human being, the reduction of the human body to a piece of property.<sup>11</sup> In late antiquity the experience of slavery was diverse, because circumstances and masters and slaves were diverse. But the essential core of the slave experience, shared by slaves of all stripes, was the fact that the slave was human property. The slave was the one whose body had a price, who might someday know what it was like to sit on the auction block and watch “the bidder lifting his finger.”<sup>12</sup> The Roman slave system was a vast and interconnected market in human bodies. This fact often lies uneasily beneath the surface, because our sources tell us so little about the workings of commerce or about the actual experience of slavery. But the Roman slave system was a market that could move bodies from Gaul to Egypt, from Mauretania to Anatolia.<sup>13</sup> It was a system in which sale, in which the conversion of the slave from individual to chattel, could be effected at a moment’s notice. Some masters were alive to this threat and wielded it against their slaves: “There are slaves who fear this utterly, more than the penalty of incarceration or chains.”<sup>14</sup> The commercial networks of the Roman empire were an existential reality for Roman slaves. Slaves were chattel in the Roman empire, a material, legal, philosophical and existential fact.

The existence of the slave in the market, the need to subject the slave to complete ownership, determined those inescapable symptoms of slavery: deracination from family and community alliance, lack of social honor, subjection to brutal domination, and exploitation of the slave’s body, its productive and reproductive capacity. In the words of Libanius, “The slave is one who will at some point belong to someone else, whose body can be sold. And what could be more humiliating, than to have money taken

<sup>11</sup> Andreau and Descat 2006, 18; Weiler 2003, 53–4; Finley 1998 (orig. 1980), 145; Shaw 1998, 12; Garnsey 1996, 1; Harrill 1995, 14–18; Brockmeyer 1979, 3. Property is a way of constructing and systematizing power (the absolute power to use and to transfer). cf. Patterson 1982, 13, for a comparative approach which can encompass less complex societies where slave status was not articulated through a property system; Rotman 2004, 25–51; Miers and Kopytoff 1977, 11. But definitions which identify the commodification of the human person as the essence of slavery are more persuasive: Davis 2006, 30–2; Lovejoy 2003, 1; Johnson 1999; Watson 1980a, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Ambr. Ep. 7.17 (CSEL 82: 51): *licitatorem . . . tollentem digitum*. <sup>13</sup> See chapter 2.

<sup>14</sup> Ambr. Tob. 8.31 (CSEL 32.2: 535): *habent servi quod amplius quam carceris poenas et vincula reformident*.

by the old, given by the new master? For indeed, has not this body been mutilated, and the soul utterly destroyed?"<sup>15</sup> The sale was the essence of slavery, systematic humiliation its inevitable consequence. The inevitable dehumanizing qualities of slavery are revealed in a range of late antique documents. Most immediately, a number of tracts remain, by preachers, popular orators, and philosophers, purporting to define the "true" nature of slavery by subverting its actual meaning in the late Roman world.<sup>16</sup> These speeches represent the self-assurance of the master class and a taste for ticklish rhetorical inversions. Yet, in purporting to describe an esoteric "true" slavery, they often put up as straw men the very presumptions they wanted to invert: the audience's mundane understanding of slavery. These speeches reveal a society familiar with slavery as a matter not only of commodification, but also of dishonor and domination.

Libanius, for instance, wanted to prove that everyone from the butcher and the baker to the philosopher was, in some way, a "slave." To do so, he had to dispel from the mind of his audience the idea that slavery was a matter of dishonor. Dishonor, for an oratorical master who had the pulse of his listeners, was the most immediately felt attribute of the slave. "Whenever someone is offended, if he is a free man he will complain vociferously. But, if a man outrages a slave, and then should be accused of it, he becomes riled and says that he is allowed to strike the slave – just as though the slave were a piece of stone."<sup>17</sup> Such a mundane encounter summoned for Libanius a welter of deeply felt emotions activated by the dynamics of power and social recognition. The social correlate of being a piece of chattel was a complete lack of honor. Female slaves lacked the formal power and network of relationships to protect their bodies, the measure of feminine honor; male slaves were denied access to the normal symbols of masculine dignity, right down to their name. Slaves were *outside* the system of social recognition, the game of honor.

To overturn their audience's expectations, late antique rhetors also had to argue that slavery was *not* a system of interlocking violence and fear. For those surrounded by the institution, it was all too obvious that "nothing

<sup>15</sup> Lib. Or. 25.71 (Foerster vol. 2: 571): ὁ δούλος ἄλλοτε ἄλλου γίνεται καὶ ἔστι πρᾶσις τοῦ σώματος. καὶ τί ταύτη γε ἐκεῖνος ἀθλιώτερος, εἰ ἀργύριον ὁ μὲν ἔλαβεν, ὁ δὲ ἔδωκεν; οὐ γὰρ δὴ τὸ σώμα γε αὐτῷ τοῦτο ἐπήρωσεν οὐδ' αὖ τὴν ψυχὴν διέφθειρεν. . .

<sup>16</sup> Garnsey 1996, 16–19, on this class of discourse.

<sup>17</sup> Lib. Or. 25.1 (Foerster vol. 2: 539): καὶ ὅταν δὲ προπηλακίζηται τις, μᾶλλον τι δεινολογεῖται τῷ ἐλευθέρῳ εἶναι, καὶ ἄν γε εἰς δούλον ὑβρίζη, πάλιν, εἰ ἐγκαλεῖ τις, ποιεῖται δεινὸν ἐξεῖναι λέγων τύπτειν, ὥσπερ τοὺς λίθους.

is more particular to slavery than the permanent fear.”<sup>18</sup> Slavery was a power relationship sanctioned by violent domination and attendant fear. In a discourse on slavery, the emperor Julian would say that “he is truly a slave who has another man as a master who forces him to do whatever the master wants, and, if the slave does not obey, punishes him, and in the words of the poet, ‘visits grievous pain upon him’ . . . though, even the harshest of masters do not treat all their slaves in such a way, while often a word or a threat will suffice.”<sup>19</sup> The arsenal of the master was as subtle as it was sinister. As Julian recognized, slavery was a relationship of exploitation achieved by domination, whether its mechanics be physical or psychological.

Slavery was such a charged metaphor because it was an exceptionally important component of the Roman social edifice. Slavery has been a virtually universal feature of human societies, but it is highly unusual for slavery to become a central rather than peripheral institution.<sup>20</sup> Societies with slaves are common, but slave societies are exceedingly rare. The notion of a “slave society,” although it has a long pedigree, was most influentially formulated by Finley to describe societies where slaves are present in large numbers, where slave labor is instrumental in central productive processes, and where the domination of slaves has deep cultural consequences.<sup>21</sup> It is immediately apparent that no clear threshold guards any of these criteria. And like any tool of analysis, the idea of a “slave society” can be used and abused. There were already problems in the way that Finley used it. Writing before the great strides in non-western historiography, he underemphasized the breadth of world slavery. Writing before realistic estimates of the ancient slave population, he overstated the quantitative dimensions of Roman slavery. The categories of the slave society and the society with slaves, moreover, should be seen as types, admitting of shades and variations, and not as binary alternatives. But Finley’s notion of a slave society is worth salvaging.

<sup>18</sup> Ambr. Ios. 4.20 (CSEL 32.2: 87): *nihil enim tam speciale servitutis est quam semper timere*. See chapter 5.

<sup>19</sup> Iul. Imp. Or. 9.15 (Rochefort vol. 2.1: 163–4): ἀλλ’ ἐκεῖνός ἐστιν ὡς ἀληθῶς δοῦλος, οὗ κύριός ἐστιν ἕτερος προσαναγκάσαι πράττειν ὅτι ἂν κελύη, καὶ μὴ βουλόμενον κόλασαι καί, τὸ λεγόμενον ὑπὸ τοῦ ποιητοῦ, “κακαῖς ὀδύνησι πελάζειν . . .” Καίτοι γε τοιοῦτον οὐδὲ οἱ τραχύτατοι τῶν δεσποτῶν ἐπὶ πάντων ποιοῦσι τῶν οἰκετῶν, ἀλλὰ καὶ λόγος ἀρκεῖ πολλάκις καὶ ἀπειλή.

<sup>20</sup> Garnsey 1996, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Finley 1998 (orig. 1980), 135–60. cf. Weiler 2003, 55–72; Turley 2000, 62–100; Berlin 1998; Oakes 1990, 36–9. For its origins, Higman 2001.

This book is an extended comment on the claim that Roman imperial society of the fourth century was a slave society. This chapter outlines the dimensions of the slave population; chapters 2–4 describe the material impact of slavery; the remainder of the book characterizes the social and institutional ramifications of the slave system. Throughout the discussion our most important guides will be those who witnessed the Roman slave system first-hand, for they have left behind ample indication that they lived in a slave society. They will tell us, in their own words, that slavery was central in the construction of honor.<sup>22</sup> They will tell us that primary social roles, such as the *pater familias*, were indelibly shaped by the presence of slaves.<sup>23</sup> They will tell us that the institutionalized sexual exploitation of slaves was an integral part of their society.<sup>24</sup> They paraded slaves through the streets in their most sacred political rites.<sup>25</sup> They claimed that slaves were the symbol of wealth. Most importantly, they recognized that slave labor was a primary means of accumulating wealth.<sup>26</sup> Not in all societies do so many contemporaries insist in so many ways that slavery was so important. The evidence of the long fourth century points to that convergence of forces, that distinct momentum, which makes slavery more than a peripheral institution. The late Roman empire was inhabited by a slave society.

#### TOWARDS A CENSUS OF LATE ROMAN SLAVERY

Grand narratives like “conquest” and “transition” have a special influence in ancient history for an insidious reason: our evidence is limited and a good story tends to stick. The prefabricated story of rise and fall, loosely following the fortunes of the army, has subtly influenced evidentiary standards in the study of ancient slavery. Decline was always a thing to be *explained* rather than *demonstrated* – two very different projects.<sup>27</sup> Scheidel has justly ridiculed the canonical estimates of the number of slaves in the late republic and early empire. They are, bluntly, “devoid of any evidentiary foundation,” and yet they managed to usurp the status of received fact.<sup>28</sup> Scheidel’s persuasive demolition of these figures clears the way for serious discussion. But it is notable that his arguments take the form of establishing plausible limits on the number of slaves. By working *down* from the absurdly overblown numbers, he reconstructs a plausible model

<sup>22</sup> See chapter 8.    <sup>23</sup> Lact. Inst. 4.3 (CSEL 19.1: 280–1).

<sup>24</sup> Hier. Ep. 77.3 (CSEL 55: 39).    <sup>25</sup> The consular manumission ritual: see part III.

<sup>26</sup> See chapter 4.    <sup>27</sup> McKeown 2007, 52–76.    <sup>28</sup> Scheidel 2008, 106; 2005a, 1999, and 1997.

of the slave population.<sup>29</sup> The historian of the late Roman slave population does not have the same luxury.

The sources, as in all periods of antiquity, are emphatically insufficient. If anything, the late Roman evidence presents more of a challenge, simply because the balance of documentary to literary material is tipped further towards the latter than in previous eras. However foolhardy this endeavor may seem, it remains absolutely necessary, because the problems do not simply disappear once we admit that numbers are hard or impossible to find. Even if we formally eschew “the numbers game,” silent conjectures about the number and distribution of slaves are likely to operate, if only in the back of our minds. If one quietly assumes that Melania with her thousands of slaves was representative of the wealthiest 1 percent of the Roman aristocracy, or that the “poor” slave-owner of John Chrysostom was below the average level of wealth, then strange, indefensible images of Roman society emerge. It is more dangerous *not* to ask questions like how many slaves there were, or how representative a given source is, even when the answers to such questions are inevitably tentative and imprecise.

How, then, can we bring some order to the chaos of the evidence? Finley, aware that the estimates of the slave population rested on thin empirical foundations, urged historians to identify the social “location” of slavery. Scheidel has shown how this might be pursued even more robustly with what he calls a “bottom-up” approach, in place of the undisciplined “top-down” attempts to guess how many slaves there were. This is surely the right way to proceed. The method involves three steps, each of which entails margins of error: (1) identify *types* of slave-holders, (2) gather all the evidence for slave-ownership of each type in order to establish a plausible *range* of the number of slaves an owner could have owned, and, finally, (3) plug these figures into the most reasonable *models* of Roman society available. Steps (1) and (2) are of most immediate concern here, since we can rely on existing scholarship to provide us with a model of Roman social structure. Perhaps better organization of the data, more critical use of the sources, or new knowledge about Roman society as a whole will allow us to improve the numbers. In the meantime, some quantitative discipline is better than none.

The late Roman source material presents a kaleidoscope of fragmentary insights into the patterns of slave-owning in the fourth century. To bring order to this anarchy, the first step is to establish workable categories of slave-ownership. These categories are imposed, a simplified version of

<sup>29</sup> Scheidel 2005a.

reality, but they are justified if they improve our ability to sift and weigh the evidence. We can identify four distinct types of slave-ownership, roughly in descending order of wealth: (1) Illustrious, (2) Elite, (3) Bourgeois, and (4) Agricultural.<sup>30</sup> These divisions are based on multiple criteria: the scale of wealth, the labor performed by the household, and the physical location of the household. The lines between the types are not hard and fast, but when we apply the categories to the evidence, they do help us trace distinctive patterns in the structures of slave-ownership.<sup>31</sup>

Illustrious and Elite slave-owners sat atop the Roman social pyramid, representing the wealthiest 1 or 1.5 percent of Roman society (see p. 46); they were by far the largest scale slave-owners. Because wealth was extremely stratified even within the very top tier of Roman society, it is helpful to distinguish them as separate groups. The label Illustrious takes its inspiration from the title *illustris*, standardized in the later fourth century for the highest tier of the senatorial order.<sup>32</sup> We use it to refer to those 500 or 600 families who controlled the largest individual portfolios of property, the core of the senatorial order, most of whom lived in the west, in Rome. These households enjoyed staggering amounts of wealth, and they could own hundreds, even thousands of slaves, but they represented only the top five-thousandths of 1 percent of the Roman population.

Elite slave-owners included the bulk of the senatorial order (*spectabiles* and *clarissimi*), the remnants of the equestrian order, decurions, and other members of Roman society with roughly equivalent wealth – the rest of the top 1 or 1.5 percent of the aristocracy. It is especially fitting to group these individuals together in the fourth century, for during this period the senatorial order expanded from some 600 members to something like 6,000, effectively extinguishing the equestrian order and siphoning off the top layers of the curial class.<sup>33</sup> This process, so painful for the functioning of the town councils, makes no real difference for our reconstruction. There was, of course, tremendous stratification within this category – just imagine the difference between the lower tiers of the curial class in, say, Thagaste and a principal member of the Alexandrian town council. We will argue that slave-holding within this category varied accordingly, from half-a-dozen to possibly scores of slaves.

Illustrious and Elite households share important features that distinguish them from Bourgeois and Agricultural slave-holders. Only within

<sup>30</sup> Throughout the book, the capitalized use of these terms refers back to this taxonomy.

<sup>31</sup> These categories are not exhaustive (e.g. public slaves are omitted, see Grey forthcoming; Lenski 2006a), but in material terms, households and estates were the vital players.

<sup>32</sup> Jones 1964, 528–30.      <sup>33</sup> Heather 1998; Lepelley 1986.



wealthier households did any distinction between the *familiae urbanae* and *familiae rusticae* hold. When late antique authors spoke of them as discrete categories, it signaled households where function or location could distinguish between different sorts of slaves.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the composition of the *familiae urbanae* in Illustrious and Elite households followed distinctive patterns. Historians of servitude in the high middle ages have described a crucial difference in the organization of service in aristocratic and bourgeois households.<sup>35</sup> Truly large aristocratic households, with staffs ranging from half-a-dozen to hundreds, exhibited structural features that distinguished them from smaller slave-holding households. Large households employed a higher ratio of male slaves than female slaves. This imbalance was an effect of the greater diversity of specializations typed as male labor.<sup>36</sup> Middling households, on the other hand, with few slaves, were more likely to employ a balanced number of male and female slaves – if not *more* females, who performed unskilled domestic and textile labor, to say nothing of sexual exploitation.<sup>37</sup> By all appearances, an analogous distinction between large and medium households, our Illustrious/Elite and Bourgeois/Agricultural, also held in antiquity.

Bourgeois and Agricultural slave-holders were distinguished from Illustrious and Elite households by the smaller scale of their wealth, and they were distinguished from each other by the type of labor they performed. The label “Bourgeois” is patently anachronistic, but there is no good terminology for that wide category of Mediterranean society under Roman rule, inferior to the highest echelon but nevertheless enjoying a lifestyle safely above subsistence, status conscious, consumerist in its economic habits. It has sometimes been called a “middle class,” and the harmless if dull label “middling” is enjoying a renaissance.<sup>38</sup> “Petty bourgeois” is closer to what we mean, but cumbersome. The word forces us to confront the sheer size of this social element in the Roman world, so we might be forgiven for dropping the inverted commas. This group constitutes the visible element of town society beneath the curial order, stretching into the professions and trades, into the artisanal and petty mercantile families that can be found owning slaves in late antiquity. As we will see below, sub-elite slave-ownership in the Roman world was frequently noted by contemporaries,

<sup>34</sup> The line was still often fluid: Dig. 32.99.pr.      <sup>35</sup> Romano 1996, 106–17.

<sup>36</sup> Saller 2007a, 105; Hasegawa 2005, 30–41; Joshel 1992; Treggiari 1979b and 1975a.

<sup>37</sup> cf. fifteenth-century Genoa, where 97 percent of slaves were female: Gioffré 1971, and more on p. 62.

<sup>38</sup> “Middling,” e.g. Scheidel and Friesen 2009. “Middle class,” Hirschfeld 2001, 258. Goody 2004, esp. 137–8, on the rise of the bourgeois in early modern period. Morley 2006, 29, on the rhetorical strategy of such labels.

and recognizing this group will enrich our understanding of the literary evidence.

Slave-owning in the Bourgeois style is characterized by the relatively smaller number of slaves in the household, under a half-dozen slaves and frequently only two or three. In this type of household, the sex ratio among the slaves was likely to be balanced or tilted towards females. The Bourgeois household is one in which the family is largely independent from agricultural labor, even though some Bourgeois households owned land. These households were located in the city. Bourgeois slave-ownership can be found at various times and places across Mediterranean history, and it became prominent in the late medieval and early modern periods, when levels of consumption and urbanism once again expanded.<sup>39</sup> The intense urbanization of the Roman world was driven, in no small measure, by this style of slave-ownership. Bourgeois households were a key characteristic of the Roman city and thus of Roman society.<sup>40</sup>

The final type of household slave-ownership in the Roman empire is the Agricultural household, what we might call the rich peasant or the elite villager. Over 80 percent of the population lived outside the city, and the importance of slavery among well-to-do rural households cannot be ignored. In the east, rural habitation was organized around village life, and slavery appears to have been prominent among the top tier of village families.<sup>41</sup> In the west, rural settlement was dispersed; the countryside was dotted with peasant households, middling farmsteads, and estate centers.<sup>42</sup> The existence of slavery on the family farm in the west is a crucial but poorly studied phenomenon. Even in the supposed heyday of the slave villa, the archaeology of the countryside points to a diverse settlement pattern, heavily populated with small- and middle-sized structures.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, even village society in the east knew its small-scale stratification. The well-to-do rural household, while not Elite in scale, and not Bourgeois in habitation, was a player in the Roman slave system and must therefore find recognition in our model.

This rough, working typology can help us make sense of the fragmentary data for late antique slavery. The evidence is relentlessly impressionistic, and the ancient authors, of course, have used their terms rather than ours. In what follows, we gather evidence which provides clues about the social

<sup>39</sup> E.g. Stuard 1983; Goitein 1967–93, vol. 1, 130–47; Origo 1955.

<sup>40</sup> Jongman 2003, earlier period. MacMullen 1987; Hahn 1976 and 1961, for late antiquity.

<sup>41</sup> Bagnall 1996, 125. <sup>42</sup> Wickham 2005a, 442.

<sup>43</sup> Jongman 2003, 111; Dyson 1981, 82; Potter 1979. Medium-sized rural sites: Lewit 1991, 22–4. Rathbone 2008 is esp. valuable, for the late republic.

location of slavery. There are contemporary observations on the extent of slave-ownership and, occasionally, comments on different tiers of slave-holding. These last are truly precious, for they validate and enrich our attempt to categorize different scales of slave-holding in the late empire. There are also surviving census documents, which are records that must be located, geographically and socially, no less than the literary evidence. Imperfect though they are, they remain invaluable. Finally, we sometimes know the social profile of specific, individual slave-holders whom we can place within our categories. Individually, none of these sets of information would be satisfying, but in conjunction they begin to gain some credibility, and they can help us establish plausible ranges of slave-ownership within each of our categories.

(1) *Illustrious slave-holders in the late Roman empire.* At the beginning of the fourth century, the top 500–600 families constituted the senatorial order. By the end of the fourth century, the senatorial order had expanded to include thousands of members, but the old core remained, so that the emperors were forced to recognize three distinctions within the order, *illustres*, *spectabiles*, and *clarissimi*.<sup>44</sup> The *illustres* were the top of the top, holding the highest offices of state such as the consulate and the praetorian prefecture. We do not know precisely how many enjoyed this official rank, but for our purposes we can work with a figure on the order of the scale of the old senate, some 500–600 families, the wealthiest 0.0048 percent of the empire.<sup>45</sup> Wealth, primarily in land, was extraordinarily stratified in late Roman society, but perhaps not radically more so than in the high empire; narratives of constant, linear accumulation rest on little evidence.<sup>46</sup> Although their land-holdings were scattered across Italy, Sicily, and Africa, the wealthiest senators of the fourth century still resided in Rome and formed a distinctly important socio-political bloc. Their extreme wealth is known to us, in the famous income figures reported by Olympiodorus and through the examples of Symmachus and Melania. They have left traces, archaeologically, through their grand *domus* in the City as well as their palatial villas in the countryside.<sup>47</sup>

The domestic establishments of illustrious households could contain dozens, scores, possibly hundreds of slaves. Ammianus vividly described the opulent showmanship of the rich Roman household, literally parading its slaves through the street in marching order under the command of

<sup>44</sup> Jones 1964, 528–30.

<sup>45</sup> All calculations employ an average of four persons per household (cf. Scheidel and Friesen 2009, n. 73) and a total population of 50 million.

<sup>46</sup> See chapter 4. <sup>47</sup> In general, Wickham 2005a, 162–63.

the *praepositus*, the head slave, like an army divided into divisions: those in front carrying the master's carriage, then the weavers, then the kitchen crew, then the rest of the slaves indiscriminately, with a contingent of eunuchs, ranked oldest to youngest, bringing up the rear. The rich Roman, he said, also took fifty slaves to the bath, an exaggeration surely, but a suggestive one.<sup>48</sup> In the *Historia Augusta*, the senator Tacitus was represented manumitting one hundred of his urban slaves – he supposedly had more.<sup>49</sup> The seventy-five slave-girls and eunuchs that Melania took with her *after* her renunciation of the material world were only a fraction of her once-great Roman household.<sup>50</sup> Jerome, always ready with unsolicited advice for the wealthiest women of the Roman senate, imagined a massive center of textile production within the rich household.<sup>51</sup> The property of the senator Symmachus helps us to visualize how a small army of male agents might be employed in a large senatorial household.<sup>52</sup> Within these households the degree of specialization and level of investment in human capital was greatest; the Illustrious household was a conglomerate agro-firm.<sup>53</sup>

The question of how many rural slaves the typical Illustrious household owned is a particularly important and intractable problem that will be discussed below, in conjunction with the related question of how many rural slaves we should imagine on the land of Elite households. For now it is worth eliciting a few immediate indications of the scale of agricultural slavery on the land of Illustrious slave-holders. The best-known case is the property of Melania the Younger, whose wealth is described in some detail by multiple sources. One witness claimed that she owned well over 8,000 slaves; her biography depicts a single estate complex with 2,400 slaves and claims, in a cautiously worded passage, that she freed thousands of her slaves.<sup>54</sup> John Chrysostom, in a fiesty harangue against the rich, accused eastern aristocrats of owning “so and so many acres of land, ten or twenty estates or more, and just as many baths, a thousand slaves, or two thousand, litters covered with silver and spangled with gold.”<sup>55</sup> We should

<sup>48</sup> Amm. 14.6.16–17 (Seyfarth vol. 1: 15) and Amm. 28.4.8–9 (Seyfarth vol. 2: 78). cf. Pedanius Secundus with his 400 slaves, cited *ad infinitum* in discussions of Roman slavery.

<sup>49</sup> SHA, Tacit. 10.7 (Hohl vol. 2: 194).

<sup>50</sup> Pall. H. Laus. 61 (Butler vol. 2: 156). Olympias took fifty *cubicularii* into ascetic retirement. Ioh. Chrys. Ep. Olymp. (SC 13: 418).

<sup>51</sup> Hier. Ep. 130.1 (CSEL 56: 176); Hier. Vig. 6 (PL 23: 345).

<sup>52</sup> See chapter 4; Vera 1986b. <sup>53</sup> See chapter 3.

<sup>54</sup> Ger. Vit. Mel. (lat.) 18.3 (Laurence: 188–90); Pall. H. Laus. 61 (Butler vol. 2: 156). See chapter 4.

<sup>55</sup> Ioh. Chrys. In Mt. 63.4 (PG 58: 608): πλεθρῶν γῆς τόσων καὶ τόσων μέμνησαι, καὶ οἰκῶν δέκα καὶ εἴκοσιν, ἢ καὶ πλείονων, καὶ βαλανείων τοσοῦτων, καὶ ἀνδραπόδων χιλίων, ἢ δις τοσοῦτων, καὶ ὀχημάτων ἀργυρενδέτων καὶ χρυσοπάστων. Schiavone 2000, 112, has believed Chrysostom's claim, while MacMullen 1987, 364, is skeptical. De Ste. Croix 1981, 242 and Liebeschuetz 1972, 47, emphasize the rhetorical character of the passage.

note too that when Chrysostom wished to say “countless” slaves (which he often did), he used the Greek “myriads.”<sup>56</sup> In the linguistic register of Chrysostom, the use of *thousands* is deliberate. It is possible that the 152 slaves belonging to a single owner on Thera were part of an Illustrious portfolio. Parallel evidence reinforces these impressions. The slaves who appear in senatorial property disputes, the private armies of slaves raised by senators, the lingering fears of slave rebellions, the desperate debates over whether to enlist slaves in the army – if hard to quantify, these testimonies are at least consistent with the hypothesis that masses of slaves labored on the land of the Illustrious.<sup>57</sup>

Given their prominence in the sources which survive, we must actively remember just how thin the Illustrious crust truly was, 0.0048 percent of society. Despite the traces they have left in the literature and in the soil it is, as always, hard to establish any reliable averages. Within that very tiny elite who sat atop the precipitously steep social hierarchy, the evidence suggests a range of slave-ownership in the hundreds or even thousands of slaves.<sup>58</sup>

(2) *Elite slave-holders in the late Roman empire.* When we speak of Elite slave-holders, we are still within the very highest echelons of Roman society, the top 1–1.5 percent. We include here *spectabiles* and *clarissimi*, the remnants of the equestrian order, as well as decurions and other wealthy members of Roman society. Over the fourth century, the senatorial order expanded by a factor of ten, drawing principally from the top tiers of the town councils; the famous “crisis” of the town councils was first and foremost an administrative adjustment.<sup>59</sup> We do not know either the number of town councils, nor the average number of councilors in each city, but some reasonable orders of magnitude have been suggested.<sup>60</sup> Total estimates range from 100,000 to 360,000.<sup>61</sup> We can conservatively accept the lowest figure, 100,000, although it may exclude from our reconstruction some of the more modest councilors from lesser towns whose slave-holding patterns will thus fall into the Bourgeois pattern.<sup>62</sup> There were also wealthy

<sup>56</sup> Ioh. Chrys. Salut. Prisc. 1.4 (PG 51: 193); Ioh. Chrys. In Mt. 12.5 (PG 57: 207); Ioh. Chrys. In act. Apost. 13.4 (PG 60: 110); Ioh. Chrys. In Coloss. 7.5 (PG 62: 350).

<sup>57</sup> See chapter 4 and esp. Lenski 2009.

<sup>58</sup> Given the stratification within each group, the median will always be well below the mean; the number of slaves per slave-holder is higher than the number of slaves of the middle slave-holder.

<sup>59</sup> Heather 1998; Zuckerman 1998; Whittow 1990.

<sup>60</sup> Tacoma 2006, 132–40; Laniado 2002, 5–7; Nichols 1988, demonstrated that there was no universal size.

<sup>61</sup> Scheidel and Friesen 2009 (130,000); Jongman 2006 and 1988, 193; Alföldy 1986, 127 (100,000–150,000). See Duncan-Jones 1982, 283–7. Maddison 2007; Goldsmith 1984.

<sup>62</sup> Augustine’s *Confessions* show slaves in and around his family, a modest curial family (not a poor family – see Shaw 1987a) from a third-rate town.

inhabitants of late Roman society who did not boast, or suffer, senatorial or curial rank, and they can be found owning slaves in the Elite style during the fourth century.<sup>63</sup> Again it is impossible to know how many there were, but informed guesses have put them between 65,000 and 130,000 in the high empire, so let us assume the lowest figure for the fourth century.<sup>64</sup> Excluding the Illustrious, the sum of 5,500 senators, 100,000 decurions, and 65,000 independently wealthy individuals yields 170,500 Elite households. In a population of 50 million, our Elite households would represent the top 1.36 percent of society.<sup>65</sup>

Elite slave-ownership, falling beneath the Illustrious tier, but above the Bourgeois level, ranged from a half-a-dozen to scores of slaves. It is reasonable to posit that when our fourth-century sources, especially outside of Rome, speak of the “rich man” with his slaves, they are describing slaveholders that fall into our Elite category. Extensive levels of slave-ownership are well attested among this class, in both household and agricultural contexts, from distant parts of the empire. Cyril of Alexandria spoke of rich households with an immoderate abundance of specialized slaves.<sup>66</sup> The Cappadocian fathers were concerned by this sort of opulent household, with its “cooks, bakers, winepourers, hunters, sculptors, painters, and those who serve every pleasure.”<sup>67</sup> Basil, likewise, presumed that the rich man would have innumerable agricultural slaves, overseers, industrial workers, in addition to an extravagant contingent of household slaves.<sup>68</sup> Basil knew a greedy official who had amassed “an abundance of land, farms and estates, herds and slaves.”<sup>69</sup> No large property could be mentioned without its servile component.<sup>70</sup> Late antique authors regularly assumed that the “rich man” not only owned slaves, but owned “multitudes,” “droves,” “herds,” “swarms,” “armies,” or simply “innumerable” slaves.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>63</sup> CT 12.1.96 (AD 383). The evidence for land-holding from Egypt (Bagnall 1992) and Asia Minor (Harper 2008) also allows for Elite-level wealth outside the curial order. See also chapter 3 for merchants, without official rank, who owned slaves.

<sup>64</sup> Scheidel and Friesen 2009 (65,000–130,000).

<sup>65</sup> Below the estimates of Friesen 2004, 340, and towards the lower end of Scheidel and Friesen 2009.

<sup>66</sup> Cyr. Hom. Pasch. II.4 (PG 77: 648).

<sup>67</sup> Bas. Hom. Div. 2.2 (Courtonne: 46–7): μάγειροι, σιτοποιοί, οινοχόοι, θηρευταί, πλάσται, ζωγράφοι, ἡδονῆς παντοίας δημιουργοί. Reflected in late Roman art: Dunbabin 2003b, 156.

<sup>68</sup> Bas. Hom. Div. 2.2 (Courtonne: 46–7).

<sup>69</sup> Bas. Hom. Mart. Iulit. I (PG 31: col 237): γῆς τε πλῆθος ἀποτεμόμενος, καὶ ἀγρούς καὶ κώμας, καὶ βοσκήματα καὶ οἰκέτας.

<sup>70</sup> Ps.-Ath. Virg. 91 (CSCO 593: 34); Ioh. Chrys. Thdr. 2.18.17 (SC 117: 192); Ioh. Chrys. Psalm. 49.1 (PG 55: 239); Ioh. Chrys. Hoc scit. (PG 56: 275); Lib. Or. 8.1 (Foerster vol. 1: 385); Aug. Conf. 1.19.30 (CC 27: 16–7).

<sup>71</sup> Multitudes: Petr. Alex. Div. 55 (Pearson and Vivian: 119); Ioh. Chrys. Subintr. 9.27 (Dumortier: 76–7); Ioh. Chrys. Ad pop. Ant. 2.5 (PG 49: 40); Gr. Naz. Or. 16.19 (PG 35: 961); Cyr. Hom. Pasch.

The letters and speeches of Libanius cast light on the slave-holding patterns of Elite households. He described the rise of a man named Heliodorus, a *garum* merchant who made money, invested it in land and slaves, and then decided to pursue a legal education. He eventually served the emperor, and as a reward he was given “many farms in Macedonia, still more in Aitolia and Akarnania, gold, silver, an abundance of slaves, and herds of horses and cattle.”<sup>72</sup> Thalassius, a man Libanius wished to nominate for the senate, had a knife factory in his household staffed with slave labor.<sup>73</sup> Aristophanes, a decurion of Corinth, owned estates with slaves in his native town.<sup>74</sup> Perhaps most revealing, Libanius praised a retired military commander for being virtuous but *not* wealthy. “This man for a long time commanded many soldiers, but he was barely able to buy one farm, and even it was nothing to praise. He had eleven slaves, twelve mules, three horses, four Laconian dogs, but he terrified the souls of the barbarians.”<sup>75</sup> It says something that a military officer in late antiquity could retire, buy a modest farm, staff it with nearly a dozen slaves, and still be the first example of someone distinctly not wealthy. From the perspective of an Antiochene councilor, the ownership of eleven slaves was unremarkable.

The documentary evidence, incomplete though it is, adds confirmation that it is reasonable to associate curial and other wealthy households with slave-ownership of some scale. A large curial-scale property in Hermonthis included fifteen field slaves, and there were clearly numerous others in the central management unit and domestic sphere.<sup>76</sup> A third-century will describing the property of a wealthy Alexandrian family mentioned some twenty-two slaves.<sup>77</sup> A third-century land-owner, not apparently of any status, left his wife seven slaves.<sup>78</sup> In 289 an Oxyrhynchite man pled poverty,

11.5 (PG 77: 648). Drovers: Choric. Or. 32.7 (Foerster and Richtsteig: 346). Army: Ioh. Chrys. Psalm. 49.1 (PG 55: 239). Herds: Ioh. Chrys. In 1 Cor. 40.5 (PG 61: 353); Hier. Ep. 22.16 (CSEL 54: 163–4). Swarms: Ioh. Chrys. In 1 Cor. 40.5 (PG 61: 354). Innumerable: Bas. Hom. Div. 2.2 (Courtonne: 46–7); Bas. Attend. 5 (Rudberg: 31); Bas. (dub.) Is. 2.89 (PG 30: 264); Ioh. Chrys. Salut. Prisc. 1.4 (PG 51: 193); Ioh. Chrys. In Mt. 12.5 (PG 57: 207); Ioh. Chrys. In act. Apost. 13.4 (PG 60: 110); Ioh. Chrys. In. Coloss. 7.5 (PG 62: 350).

<sup>72</sup> Lib. Or. 62.46–8 (Foerster vol. 4: 370): πολλὰ μὲν ἐν Μακεδονίᾳ γεωργίαι, πλείους δὲ ἐν Αἰτωλίᾳ καὶ Ἀκαρνανίᾳ, χρυσός, ἄργυρος, πλῆθος ἀνδραπόδων, ἵππων ἀγέλα καὶ βοῶν. PLRE 1: Heliodorus 2, 411.

<sup>73</sup> Lib. Or. 42.21 (Foerster vol. 3: 317); PLRE 1: Thalassius 4, 888.

<sup>74</sup> Lib. Or. 14.45 (Foerster vol. 2: 103); PLRE 1: Aristophanes, 106.

<sup>75</sup> Lib. Or. 47.28 (Foerster vol. 3: 417–18): ὧν ὁ πλείστον μὲν χρόνον, πλείστων δὲ ἡγησάμενος στρατιωτῶν ἓνα μὲν μόλις ἀγρὸν ἐπρίατο, ἔτι δὲ τῶν οὐκ ἐπαινουμένων, οἰκέτας δὲ εἶχεν ἕνδεκα, ἡμίονους δώδεκα, τρεῖς δὲ ἵππους, κύνιας δὲ Λακωνίας τέτταρας, ἀλλ' ὁμοῦ δέος μὲν αὐτοῦ ταῖς τῶν βαρβάρων ἐνάκκι ψυχαῖς.

<sup>76</sup> P. Lips. 97 (AD 338). Chapter 4. <sup>77</sup> P. Flor. 1.50 (AD 268). Banaji 2001, 110–11; Kehoe 1997, 130–1.

<sup>78</sup> P. Oxy. 2474 (third century, possibly late).

but he clearly had slaves on the land.<sup>79</sup> A receipt from 355 or later included the names of thirty-eight slaves belonging to one owner.<sup>80</sup> Other late Roman documents which record the rations for slaves also point to the importance of slave-ownership on some scale.<sup>81</sup> A papyrus of AD 402 reflects the slaves belonging to a ship-captain, precisely our sort of Elite slave-holder without senatorial or curial status.<sup>82</sup>

Any tally of the slave population will depend enormously on how extensively we believe slaves were employed in agriculture on Illustrious and Elite land. Precisely because this question is at once so fundamental and so difficult, the main discussion is deferred to chapter 4 where the problem is treated at length. Here we can only signal some of the key evidence and conclusions. At the center of any attempt to quantify rural slavery should be a series of fortuitously preserved census inscriptions. Precious few fragments of any ancient census have survived outside of Egypt, yet those that have come down are uniquely valuable. A series of fourth-century census records inscribed on stone has been recovered from eleven cities scattered across the Aegean islands and coastal Asia Minor. They record the tax liabilities owed by *urban* landowners on their *rural* properties. The census inscriptions are a glimpse of the way that the land-holding elite in the central regions of the eastern Mediterranean exploited their holdings in the countryside. They offer the only quantitative insights into the extent of slavery on agricultural estates in a late Roman landscape.<sup>83</sup>

The Greek census records provide a small and fragmentary sample. The inscriptions confirm the abundant literary evidence for rural slavery among not only Illustrious but also Elite households. What they mean, at the least, is that slavery was prominent in the repertoire of labor strategies used by the aristocracy in the eastern empire. The Greek census inscriptions show slaves used in groups of 2, 4, 8, 16, 21, 22, and 152. Chapter 4 will argue that these documents descend from a region where slavery was relatively important – we would not find such extensive numbers of slaves in peripheral regions of the empire. The census inscriptions nevertheless dissolve some old assumptions about the way slave labor fit into the countryside. The Greek census inscriptions quickly belie the claim that ancient landscapes can be labeled in terms of a mode of production. The confinement of a

<sup>79</sup> P. Hamb. 268 (AD 289). cf. PSI 10.1102 (late third century, Oxyrhynchus?); P. Rain. Cent. 85 (AD 364–6).

<sup>80</sup> SPP 20.106. Bagnall 1996, 126, n. 78.

<sup>81</sup> BGU 1.34 = P. Charite 36 (AD 322); P. Duk. Inv. 553 v (after AD 252); P. Bad. 4.95.

<sup>82</sup> P. Haun. 3.68.

<sup>83</sup> Harper 2008; Thonemann 2007; Duncan-Jones 1990, 199–210; Jones 1953. Scheidel forthcoming: “the best evidence.”



“dominant slave mode of production” to a small space asks us to write off a great deal of evidence for the use of slaves in far stretches of the empire. Melania claimed to own slaves in Spain, Italy, Apulia, Campania, Sicily, Africa, Numidia, and Britain. The census inscriptions demonstrate, incontrovertibly, the use of slave labor in the Aegean and coastal Asia Minor. Papyri provide documentary proof of the penetration of slave labor into the far stretches of Egypt. A law of AD 383 allowed the town councils in Thrace to recruit from among the local plebs those “abounding in the wealth of slaves” who had avoided curial service through “the obscurity of a low name.”<sup>84</sup> There is simply too much evidence to revert to the story that slave labor was “marginal” in all parts of the empire except Italy, at least in the fourth century.

Our quantitative problem remains: how extensively was slave labor employed on Illustrious and Elite landholdings? Virtually everyone who has spent time with the late Roman evidence has concluded that rural slaves appear as numerous in the sources as before.<sup>85</sup> The census inscriptions will be the only hope for meaningful quantitative impressions. Even within the small sample, they show apparent variation, with higher levels of slavery on Thera and Lesbos, lower levels at inland Tralles. Variation was both inter- and intra-regional. We would imagine that Libanius’ “not wealthy” slaveholder with eleven slaves might appear quite well-to-do in large parts of the empire. Perhaps it is advisable to subdivide the Elite category into two broader groups, core and periphery, graded on the level of wealth, the proximity to markets, and the influence of commercialization. In the core regions, we might propose an average Elite slave-holding of twenty slaves, imagining some of them to be domestic slaves and the rest in the fields. In the periphery, we will propose a conservative average of six slaves per Elite household.<sup>86</sup> The precision of these figures is not meant to lay any claim to certainty; we are only trying to provide disciplined estimates that accord with the evidence we have as we make the challenging transition from qualitative to quantitative description.

(3) *Bourgeois slave-holders in the late Roman empire.* In the category of Bourgeois slave-ownership we include all urban households that owned less than half a dozen slaves; these were often modest households who owned

<sup>84</sup> CT 12.1.96 (AD 383): *famulantium facultate locupletes . . . obscuritate nominis vilioris*. Laniado 2002, 15.

<sup>85</sup> Vera 2007 and 1986a, 407; Wickham 2005a, 262; Giliberti 1999, 52; MacMullen 1987; all in different ways.

<sup>86</sup> The party of Theophanes, a lawyer from Hermopolis, included ca. five slaves to serve him and his two or so free assistants *on a travelling mission* undertaken for speed, not tourism: Matthews 2006, 43 and 165, and Bagnall 2007.

a handful of domestic slaves, especially slave-women. This chapter opened with John Chrysostom's claim that even the "poor" household owned whole families of slaves.<sup>87</sup> The literary sources, and scattered documentary evidence, strongly insist on extensive levels of sub-elite slave-ownership in the fourth century. This pattern is an important comment on the structure of Roman society and urges us to believe in a hierarchy of wealth that included a significant middling stratum between Elites and the majority hovering around subsistence. But what could an author like Chrysostom have meant by a "poor" slave-owning household?

First, we should note that the late Roman sources are unambiguous about sub-elite slave-ownership. In a sermon of the early fifth century, from the port town of Hippo, Augustine claimed that "the primary and everyday instance of man's power over man is the master's power over his slave. Nearly all households have this type of power."<sup>88</sup> *Prope omnes domus*.<sup>89</sup> "All households" was not a phrase we commonly find in Augustine's corpus. "Nearly all" is fairly common in his personal idiom, and when he used it, he meant it. He could say, for instance, that "nearly all lamps in Italy" burned on oil – as they surely did.<sup>90</sup> His claim that every household had slaves was not a throw-away line, and it suggests that many households in the orbit of a mid-sized late Roman town could have owned slaves.<sup>91</sup>

In his speech *On Kingship*, written in Constantinople around 397–8, Synesius of Cyrene made the striking claim that "every household, even one which prospers only a little, has a Scythian slave."<sup>92</sup> The Scythians here are the Goths, and this part of the speech was meant to stir up anxiety about the threat posed by the large number of barbarian slaves in Roman society. The speech was rhetorical and xenophobic. But it is still noteworthy that Synesius could assert that households "which prosper only a little" had not just a slave, but a Gothic one. For what it is worth, his fears proved justified, as desertion and rebellion, laced with ethnic tension, would plague the empire over the next generation.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>87</sup> Ioh. Chrys. In Ephes. 22.2 (PG 62: 158).

<sup>88</sup> Aug. Psalm. 124.7 (CC 40: 1840–1): *prima et quotidiana potestas hominis in hominem domini est in servum. prope omnes domus habent huiusmodi potestatem.*

<sup>89</sup> Shaw 1987a, 12–15, for *domus*. <sup>90</sup> Aug. Mor. eccl. 2.42 (PL 32: 1363): *prope omnes Italas lucernas.*

<sup>91</sup> The sermon is distinctly *not* a lecture to the rich. The sermon was parochial and expository, not a flamboyant speech delivered before a grand audience. MacMullen 1986a, 325, is right that social filters determined who was included in Augustine's claim of "every," but by arguing that Augustine meant simply "we who are rich," he does not account for the way that Augustine addresses his audience as a group other than the rich.

<sup>92</sup> Syn. Regn. 20 (Terzaghi: 46–8): ἅπασιν γὰρ οἶκος ὁ καὶ κατὰ μικρὸν εὖ πράττων Σκυθικὸν ἔχει τὸν δοῦλον. Syn. Calv. enc. 13 (Terzaghi: 214). Cameron and Long 1993, 109–21, esp. 111.

<sup>93</sup> See chapter 6.

The assumption among late antique authors was that owning slaves was simply a standard element of adult life.<sup>94</sup> Slaves were a common form of property listed among the belongings of a household.<sup>95</sup> Managing slaves was a normal part of life, an everyday routine.<sup>96</sup> The normal audience of a Christian sermon, from Antioch to Hippo to Amasea, understood slave-ownership as an ordinary feature of existence.<sup>97</sup> The universal presumption of slave-ownership in the sources of the late fourth and early fifth centuries may lead to the argument that the sources only tell us about the upper strata of society. In some banal sense this is obvious, but it prompts the question: Who inhabited these strata? While the upper classes are overrepresented in the surviving sources, the shift towards mainstream households in the late antique literature is unmistakable. The sermons of preachers like Augustine or Chrysostom were part of a politically triumphant, mass-scale religious movement that put them in dialogue with a wide cross-section of society.<sup>98</sup> The argument that the bishop's audience was composed exclusively of the rich centers on one circular argument: the audience included slave-owners.<sup>99</sup> But to assume that only the wealthy owned slaves is not only a fragile assumption – it disregards the social register of these sources.

When Chrysostom openly addressed the rich directly during his sermons, he encouraged them not to own herds, armies, or multitudes of slaves. Chrysostom thought that a “philosophical” Christian would own one, rather than a *phalanx*, of slaves: “for I am talking here not about the highest form of philosophy, but one that is accessible to many.”<sup>100</sup> Chrysostom operated with the standard that a Christian should only own what he “needed.” “Even if we only have two slaves, we can live. How can we have an excuse if two are not enough, since there are some who live without any slaves? We can have a brick house with three rooms . . . and if you want, two slaves.”<sup>101</sup> Chrysostom had a rough-and-ready approach to the limits involved in proper Christian slave-owning:

<sup>94</sup> Bas. Ep. 2.2 (Courtonne vol. 1: 6); Eus. P.E. 4.19.2 (SC 262: 202); Ioh. Chrys. Oppug. 3.21 (PG 47: 385); Ioh. Chrys. Thdr. 2.5.2 (SC 117: 70); Sed. Op. 1.26 (CSEL 10: 190).

<sup>95</sup> E.g. Ps.-Mac. Hom. spir. 27.2 (Dörries, Klostermann, and Krüger: 219–20).

<sup>96</sup> Ioh. Chrys. In 2 Tim. 3.3 (PG 62: 616); Ioh. Chrys. Virg. 67 (SC 125: 336–7); Lib. Or. 45.5 (Foerster vol. 3: 361).

<sup>97</sup> See especially part II. <sup>98</sup> Maxwell 2006, esp. 65–87; Mayer 2000.

<sup>99</sup> E.g. the seminal discussion of MacMullen 1989.

<sup>100</sup> Ioh. Chrys. Oppug. 3.9 (PG 47: 363): οὐπω γὰρ τὴν ἀκραν τίθημι φιλοσοφίαν, ἀλλὰ τὴν πολλοῖς ἐφικτήν.

<sup>101</sup> Ioh. Chrys. In Hebr. 28.4 (PG 63: 198): Κἂν δύο μόνους ἔχωμεν οἰκέτας, δυνάμεθα ζῆν. ὅπου γὰρ εἰσὶ τινες χωρὶς οἰκετῶν ζῶντες, ποῖαν ἡμεῖς ἔχομεν ἀπολογία, τοῖς δύο οὐκ ἀρκούμενοι; Δυνάμεθα καὶ ἐκ πλίνθων ἔχειν οἰκίαν τριῶν οἰκημάτων . . . εἰ βούλει, καὶ παῖδες δύο.

Why do you have so many slaves? Just as with clothing or dining, it is right to live according to our needs, so also with slaves. What need is there for them? There's none at all. For one master should need only one slave, or really two or three masters, one slave. If this is hard to bear, think about those who don't even have one . . . but you, if you don't lead around a herd of slaves, think it is shameful, not realizing that this *thought* in fact is what shames you . . . It is not from need that slaves are owned. If it were a necessity, one slave would suffice, or at most two. What does he want with this swarm of slaves? The rich go around to the baths, to the market, as though they were shepherds or slave-dealers. But I won't be too harsh: have a second slave.<sup>102</sup>

It was the ownership of “herds” and “swarms” of slaves by the wealthy that irked Chrysostom. We might say that he found the Elite style of slave-ownership offensive, the Bourgeois style an inescapable necessity. A highly descriptive and socially conscious author of the late fourth century insisted that there was extensive, sub-elite slavery in his panorama.

The sources sometimes provide unexpectedly detailed information about who was expected to own slaves in late Roman society. John Chrysostom, for instance, anticipated that the Christian priest would own at least one slave.<sup>103</sup> Urban professionals, such as doctors or painters, were presumed to have slaves as a matter of course.<sup>104</sup> Less savory urban characters, such as popular prostitutes, owned slaves.<sup>105</sup> Petty military officers might be expected to have a slave.<sup>106</sup> A metal collar of the Constantinian era was worn by the slave of a linen-worker.<sup>107</sup> It was said that “many slaves” even owned slaves, out of their *peculium*.<sup>108</sup> In Gaza, it was claimed that respectable stage performers could own “droves” of slaves.<sup>109</sup> Humble urban households, innkeepers or families who sold grapes or figs in the marketplace, might own slaves.<sup>110</sup> The assistant rhetors working under Libanius at the municipal

<sup>102</sup> Ioh. Chrys. In 1 Cor. 40.5 (PG 61: 353–4): Διὰ τί γὰρ πολλοὺς ἔχει οἰκέτας; Ὡσπερ γὰρ ἐν ἱματίοις τὴν χρεῖαν διώκειν δεῖ μόνον, καὶ ἐν τραπέζῃ, οὕτω καὶ ἐν οἰκέταις. Τίς οὖν ἡ χρεῖα; Οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδεμία. Καὶ γὰρ ἐνὶ τὸν ἕνα χρῆσθαι δεσπότην οἰκίῃ μόνον ἐχρήν. μᾶλλον δὲ καὶ δύο καὶ τρεῖς δεσπότης εἰ οἰκίῃ. Εἰ δὲ βαρὺ τοῦτο, ἐνόησον τοὺς οὐδὲ ἕνα ἔχοντας. . . σὺ δὲ, εἰ μὴ πολλὰς περιφέρεις ἀνδραπόδων ἀγέλας, αἰσχρὸν εἶναι νομίζεις, οὐκ εἰδὼς ὅτι τοῦτο μὲν οὖν μάλιστα ἐστὶ τὸ κατασχυνόν σε. . . Ὡστε οὐκ ἀναγκαῖον τὸ δοῦλον ἔχειν. εἰ δὲ καὶ ἀναγκαῖον, ἕνα που μόνον, ἢ τὸ πολὺ δεύτερον. Τί βούλεται τὰ σμήνη τῶν οἰκετῶν; Καθάπερ γὰρ οἱ προβατοπῶλαι καὶ οἱ σωματοκάπηλοι, οὕτως ἐν βαλανείῳ, οὕτως ἐν ἀγορᾷ περιείσιν οἱ πλουτοῦντες. Πλὴν ἀλλ' οὐδὲν ἀκριβολογοῦμαι. ἔστω σοι καὶ δεύτερος οἰκέτης.

<sup>103</sup> Ioh. Chrys. In Philip. 9.4 (PG 62: 251). Rabbis: Hezser 2003, 401.

<sup>104</sup> Aug. Tract. Io. 3.14 (CC 36: 26–7); Eun. Vit. 8.2 (Giangrande: 58). CT 13.4.4 (AD 374).

<sup>105</sup> Ioh. Chrys. In Io. 78.5 (PG 59: 432). <sup>106</sup> CT 7.22.2 (AD 326).

<sup>107</sup> CIL 15.7184; CIL 15.7175. Thurmond 1994, 468–9.

<sup>108</sup> Ioh. Chrys. In Mt. 59.4 (PG 58: 571); Aug. Sermon. 21.5 (Dolbeau: 275). See chapter 3.

<sup>109</sup> Choric. Or. 32.7 (Foerster and Richtsteig: 346). Actors buy a slave in Pall. H. Laus. 37 (Butler vol. 2: 109–10).

<sup>110</sup> Thdt. H. E. 2.9 (GCS 5: 120); Ioh. Chrys. Laz. 2.3 (PG 48: 986). A smith: P. Lond. 3.983 (4C). Carpenter: P. Kellis 8 (AD 362).

school in Antioch rented, rather than owned, a home, “like shoe cobblers.” They were so poor that one of them had three slaves, another two slaves, and another not even that many.<sup>111</sup> In other words, the adjunct professor of the late fourth century, living in a rented apartment, would own a handful of slaves.

Clearly, the ownership of a few slaves was unremarkable. Libanius claimed that the “owner of a little,” with a “meager household” and “not much money,” had three, maybe four, slaves.<sup>112</sup> A deacon at Hippo, whom Augustine claimed was a “poor man,” had bought several slaves with the money he earned before becoming a cleric.<sup>113</sup> If the rich had multitudes of slaves that necessitated complex managerial hierarchies, and small households had multiple slaves, it was a mark of *severe* poverty to have no slaves. It was terrible to be without a single slave in one’s service.<sup>114</sup> Libanius knew a man who had become so impoverished, he had “no hand, no foot, no slave.”<sup>115</sup> Basil asked that a poor man he knew receive a fair tax rating, since “he was reduced to the most extreme poverty, with barely enough for his daily sustenance, having not one slave.”<sup>116</sup> The destitute man would have “not a male, not a female slave – and maybe not even a wife.”<sup>117</sup> Heroes of the apostolic age, like Peter, led lives of such simple poverty that they had not a single slave.<sup>118</sup> Everyone except “the lowest” had some slaves.<sup>119</sup> Fourth-century ascetics had to be counseled not to buy slaves.<sup>120</sup> Legal evidence points in the same direction: in a law of 365, a runaway slave was considered a trifling legal matter, even for an official like the municipal *defensor*.<sup>121</sup> The fourth-century visual evidence amply and convincingly confirms the impression of extensive sub-elite slave-ownership.<sup>122</sup>

There are few periods of Mediterranean history when contemporaries have insisted with such regularity that slave-ownership was so widespread. How can we begin to quantify these claims of sub-elite slave-ownership? Certainly the most important measure of sub-elite slave-ownership lies in extant census papyri. The papyri of Roman Egypt include a relatively large

<sup>111</sup> Lib. Or. 31.11 (Foerster vol. 3: 129).

<sup>112</sup> Lib. Prog. 4.1.11 (Foerster vol. 8: 110): μικρῶν γάρ, οἶμαι, κύριος, οἰκιδίου φαύλου καὶ τριῶν ἢ τεττάρων ἀνδραπόδων καὶ δραχμῶν οὐ πολλῶν.

<sup>113</sup> Aug. Sermon. 356.6 (Lambot vol. 1: 136): *homo pauper*.

<sup>114</sup> Ioh. Chrys. In act. Apost. 24.4 (PG 60: 189).

<sup>115</sup> Lib. Ep. 1503 (Foerster vol. 11: 512): οὐ χεῖρες, οὐ πόδες, οὐκ οἰκίτης.

<sup>116</sup> Bas. Ep. 309.1 (Courtonne vol. 3: 185): εἰς τὴν ἐσχάτην πενίαν περιετράπη, ὡς μόλις μὲν καὶ τῆς ἑφ’ ἡμέραν τροφῆς εὐπορεῖν, ἀνδραπόδου δὲ μηδὲ ἐνὸς κατάρχειν.

<sup>117</sup> Thdt. Prov. 6.664C (PG 83: 664): οὐκ οἰκίτης, οὐ θεράπεινα, τυχὸν δὲ οὐδὲ γυνὴ σύνευνος.

<sup>118</sup> Gr. Nyss. Ep. 17.14 (SC 363: 224); Bas. (dub.) Is. 1.89 (PG 30: 264).

<sup>119</sup> Lib. Decl. 1.129 (Foerster vol. 5: 86–7): τοὺς ταπεινοτάτους.

<sup>120</sup> Evag. Pont. Rer. Mon. 5 (PG 40: 1256).

<sup>121</sup> CT 1.29.2 (AD 365). Frakes 2001, 105–8. cf. CT 2.1.8 (AD 395).

<sup>122</sup> Dunbabin 2003a, 464.

number of household census returns, but unfortunately they descend only from the first three centuries of the empire. Yet they deserve a prominent place in any attempt to quantify the extent of Roman slavery, and they at least provide us with a benchmark for judging how prominent slavery could be among Bourgeois and Agricultural households. The meticulous study of the census papyri by Bagnall and Frier shows that one-sixth of all households owned slaves.<sup>123</sup> In the cities, 21 percent of households had slaves, and slaves constituted 13 percent of the urban population. In the villages, 12 percent of households included slaves, and slaves made up almost 9 percent of the rural population.<sup>124</sup> None of the census returns are from Alexandria, where slavery may have been practiced on an equal or greater scale. The Egyptian data show that household slave-ownership in a Mediterranean province under the Roman empire – excluding its largest city and without any estate-scale holdings – accounted for over one-tenth of the population and touched one-sixth of households.

The standard analysis of the census records calls the extent of slavery in Egypt “unexpectedly high.”<sup>125</sup> The significance of the Egyptian data can hardly be overstated. The data show just what we would expect of Bourgeois slavery: a large number of families owned slaves in small groups, with more female slaves than male slaves. For urban household slavery in the empire, the census documents of Egypt are the best available evidence. Do the Egyptian census records of the imperial period provide any kind of a basis for characterizing late Roman slavery? Lactantius bitterly described the scene of a late Roman census, with the city streets swelled by unfamiliar faces, as all waited to be registered: “Every single man was present, with his children and his slaves.”<sup>126</sup> Unfortunately, no census returns survive from fourth- or fifth-century Egypt. But the papyri of the fourth century do not give the impression of drastic change, and slaves continue to appear prominently.<sup>127</sup> More importantly, the census records add depth to the abundant literary evidence. It is not easy to measure the urban Egyptian data, which show that one-fifth of urban households owned slaves, against the statements of Augustine, Synesius, Chrysostom, and others which qualitatively suggest high levels of slave-ownership. But the census records

<sup>123</sup> Bagnall and Frier 1994, 70.

<sup>124</sup> P. Oxy. 984 from a town in upper Egypt of AD 89/90 shows that 14 percent of complete households owned slaves, who were 7 percent of the population, but there are ambiguities with this data: Bagnall, Frier, and Rutherford 1997, 98, n. 30.

<sup>125</sup> Bagnall and Frier 1994, 48.

<sup>126</sup> Lact. Mort. 23.2 (Creed: 36): *unus quisque cum liberis, cum servis aderant*.

<sup>127</sup> Bagnall forthcoming and 1993 are most important statements, sensitive to the distribution of document-types. *Contra*, Fikhman 1997, 1974, and 1973.

at least reassure us that our informants were not collectively hallucinating when they reported a social landscape with extensive slavery. The essential message of the Egyptian papyri is that Bourgeois slave-holding, with large numbers of female slaves, was an integral component of the Roman slave system.

Late Roman authors assumed that to be “rich” was to own numerous slaves, to be ordinary was to own a few, and to be poor was to own one or none. This assumption broadly validates our distinction between Illustrious/Elite and Bourgeois/Agricultural slave-holding, and it helps us to understand how even the “poor” could own slaves. “Poor” is a relative term, and in late antiquity it was being stretched to new uses by the leaders of the Christian movement.<sup>128</sup> At times our authors seem to provide tantalizing clues to what they meant: in an exceptionally precise passage, Chrysostom claimed that the lowest 10 percent of society were poor.<sup>129</sup> Christian bishops did not discuss the poor altogether recklessly: Chrysostom spoke of the beggar who struggled to find adequate clothing, others of the huddled masses seeking shelter from the elements against the fire-pits of the ancient baths.<sup>130</sup> But there is no conceivable way to project slave-ownership among these “poor,” and we must accept that the word could have various registers even within the corpus of a single author like Chrysostom.<sup>131</sup> To be a “poor” slave-owner was to be in the lower tiers of the Bourgeois, clinging to respectability, and in danger of falling off into that mute, tired mass of the populace struggling to subsist, who were so poor they “owned not one slave.”<sup>132</sup> But where do we draw that line? How many Bourgeois households were there in the late empire?

A recent reconstruction of Roman imperial society identifies three broad tiers of wealth and income: elite, middling, and subsistence.<sup>133</sup> In this account, elites included senators, equestrians, decurions, and a number of wealthy households without official status, so that the category comprised 1.2–1.7 percent of the population and claimed roughly 20 percent of the empire’s annual gross income: our Illustrious and Elite households. Middling households enjoyed modest, comfortable levels of existence, but not extreme wealth, and amounted to some 6–12 percent of the population. They formed a highly visible segment who consumed

<sup>128</sup> See the essays in Holman 2008; Osborne 2006, 11; Brown 2002; Holman 2001. Woolf 2006, on the construction of poverty in the earlier period.

<sup>129</sup> Ioh. Chrys. In Mt. 66.3 (PG 58: 630). See Mayer 2006, 467–8.

<sup>130</sup> Ioh. Chrys. In 1 Cor. 31.1 (PG 61: 258); Ast. Am. Hom. 3.12 (Datema: 35).

<sup>131</sup> Lunn-Rockliffe 2006, 126. <sup>132</sup> Esp. Brown 2002, 14–15; Mayer 2006, 480–1.

<sup>133</sup> Scheidel and Friesen 2009; Friesen 2008. See already Harris 1988 for a similar line.

another 20 percent of the empire's annual production: our Bourgeois and Agricultural households.<sup>134</sup> The remaining 86–93 percent of the population lived around subsistence, a stark reminder how much of the Roman population was vulnerable to severe impoverishment and how many “Romans” lie beyond our field of vision. This reconstruction is a starting place for imagining the structure of wealth in the fourth-century empire. A middling range of 6–12 percent is highly useful, for it is hard to imagine numbers which are much higher or lower. There are reasons to believe that reality may have fallen towards the upper end of that range, even in the fourth century.<sup>135</sup> Certainly, the archaeology of domestic architecture is consistent with the hypothesis of a significant middling stratum, and perhaps more significantly, the Egyptian census papyri of the first three centuries show that 21 percent of urban households included slaves.<sup>136</sup>

If we assume a fourth-century imperial population on the order of 50 million, with a 15 percent rate of urbanization (in towns of over 5,000), then there were 1.875 million urban households in the late empire.<sup>137</sup> It would be plausible to assume that one-fifth of these urban households were “middling”: that would account for 30 percent of all middling households, leaving 70 percent of middling households in the countryside. This is to be expected, since urban populations in antiquity were wealthier in aggregate than the rural populace: it means 20 percent of the urban populace was middling, whereas just over 8 percent of the rural population attained this level of relative comfort. Many Bourgeois households owned multiple slaves, and one is a minimum to qualify in our taxonomy. To own no slaves was a mark of destitution, of social irrelevance – a sign that the household had fallen out of the middling ranks, into that 88 percent of the population who lived near subsistence. This reconstruction helps us make sense of the abundant literary record for sub-elite slave-ownership, and it helps us understand how the “poor” household – let us now say modest or vulnerable Bourgeois family – could own a handful of slaves in the towns of the late Roman empire.

(4) *Agricultural slavery in the late empire.* By this label we mean not the estate-based slavery on the land of Illustrious and Elite households, but the slaves owned and exploited within middling rural households, in

<sup>134</sup> For documentary evidence for the distribution of wealth, see esp. Bagnall 1992 for Egypt and Harper 2008 for Asia Minor.

<sup>135</sup> The estimates of Scheidel and Friesen 2009 cohere with the levels of slave-ownership in the Egyptian census records (which suggest a middling population towards the very upper end of their spectrum).

<sup>136</sup> Hirschfeld 2001, for a substantial middle class. <sup>137</sup> For population, see Introduction.



other words, rich peasants or village elites.<sup>138</sup> The urban bias of our literary evidence is unyielding; the countryside, when it is mentioned at all, is described only insofar as it affected tax collection or elite land-ownership. In other words, rural householders are largely beyond the blinkers of our sources. It is all the more striking, then, that vivid, credible, and geographically dispersed evidence attests slave-holding within this category.<sup>139</sup> Theodoret of Cyrrhus spoke of a small farmer with one field and just enough to pay the taxes and feed his family and slaves.<sup>140</sup> A law of 373 assumed that a “peasant” in Illyricum might well own a slave.<sup>141</sup> Valentinian and Valens jealously guarded the tax exemption of military veterans, shielding them from dues on the slaves they brought “to the farm.”<sup>142</sup>

Documents from late Roman Egypt confirm that slaves were owned by specific, small-scale rural households. In a will from a village outside Oxyrhynchus, a man left property to his two households – a total of seven free adults, four slaves, and at most 10 to 15 arouras of land.<sup>143</sup> The inheritance of two women in late Roman Karanis had included 61 sheep, 40 goats, 1 grinding mill, 3 talents of silver, 2 artabas of wheat, 2 slaves, and around 22 arouras of arable land – a “very middle-range holding for a villager of moderate means.”<sup>144</sup> An early fourth-century papyrus records the estate of a man with four slaves, two of them farmers and one a weaver.<sup>145</sup> The papyri show that in late Roman rural Egypt “the ownership of a small number of slaves – one to four – was not remarkable. The economic importance of slavery in such households was not marginal.”<sup>146</sup> This pattern of slavery probably held in other villages of the Roman east, where the documentation is more exiguous. A substantial series of manumission inscriptions from a village of southern Macedonia, mostly of the third century, re-confirms that slavery was important in some rather humble environments.<sup>147</sup> It is harder to know if this sort of household slavery among the upper tier of village families was common in Syria and Palestine, though there are certainly tantalizing hints.<sup>148</sup>

The only quantitative evidence we have once again comes from the Egyptian census records. In the villages, 12 percent of households included slaves, who made up almost 9 percent of the rural population.<sup>149</sup> If we

<sup>138</sup> Comparatively, Turley 2000, 77. <sup>139</sup> Vera 2007, 503.

<sup>140</sup> Thdt. H. rel. 8.14 (SC 234: 400). <sup>141</sup> CT II.II.I (AD 373): *rusticano* . . .

<sup>142</sup> CT 7.20.8 (AD 364): . . . *ad agrum*. Also CT II.I.12 and Nov. Val. 13.13.

<sup>143</sup> P. Oxy. 14.1638 (AD 282), with the comments of Bagnall 1996, 123–4.

<sup>144</sup> P. Cair. Isid. 64 (AD 298). Bagnall 1996, 124. <sup>145</sup> P. Lips. 26 (4C). Bagnall 1993, 229.

<sup>146</sup> Bagnall 1996, 125. <sup>147</sup> Petsas *et al.* 2000. See chapter 9.

<sup>148</sup> Tchalenko 1953–8, vol. I, 410–11. Syria: IGLS nos. 1409–11. Palestine: P. Nessana 31, line 43.

<sup>149</sup> Bagnall and Frier 1994, 71.

follow our assumptions, outlined above, that 10 percent of the population enjoyed middling levels of wealth, that up to 15 percent of the population lived in towns, and that one-fifth of urban households were Bourgeois households, then we would conclude that 8.2 percent of the rural population was middling. In a population of 50 million, this would give us 875,000 households of such means that we might expect them to be slave-owners. This estimate is below the levels of rural slave-ownership attested in imperial Egypt, a fact that reassures us we are not wildly overstating the possible extent of small-scale slave-owning. It is also interesting to note that among village households in Egypt, slave-ownership tended to follow the Bourgeois pattern in preferring female slaves to male slaves.<sup>150</sup> Chapter 2 will add further plausibility to this reconstruction, arguing for a decentralized slave supply inherently embedded in demographic practices such as child exposure, and Chapter 3 will explore the economic dynamics of these households. For now let us assume, conservatively, that the top 7–8 percent of rural householders entered the ranks of slave-ownership.

The aim of this exercise has been to gather the available data, to suggest an analytical way of organizing it, and to propose how the apparent patterns fit into a reconstruction of Roman society as a whole. Not a single ancient author has deigned to leave a believable report about the number of slaves in any given space or sector of Roman society; efforts to import figures from the modern world (along the crude reasoning that slavery was important in both the United States and Rome) are grossly misplaced. The only way to quantify the dimensions of the Roman slave system is through the prism of slave-ownership. If this type of investigation induces feelings of squeamishness, any analysis which describes Roman slavery as “important” or “dominant,” without critically examining what those labels mean, should make us even more uncomfortable. This approach exploits three types of data, including contemporary social observation, census records, and profiles of individual slave-owners; these three types of data have been basically convergent, and we have not found ourselves in the uncomfortable position of having to marginalize the evidence which does survive in order to fit our model.

Our reconstruction allows us to imagine ranges of possibility, different scenarios within those ranges, and hypothetical averages. These ranges operate within the assumption that our background model of the structure of wealth in late Roman society is broadly accurate. If we took the lowest

<sup>150</sup> Bagnall and Frier 1994, 97–8. Although there is cause to suspect that male slaves are underreported, for a very good reason: tax evasion. Compare Harper 2008.

Table 1.1 *Quantifying the number of slaves in the late Roman empire*

Category	% of population	Range of slave-holdings	Average no. of slaves	No. of households	Total no. of slaves
Illustrious Elite	0.0048	100s–1,000s	250	600	150,000
	1.36	6 to 20s	20 (core) 6 (periphery)	85,000	1,700,000
Bourgeois	3.0	1 to 5	2	375,000	750,000
Agricultural	7.0	1 to 5	2	875,000	1,750,000

end of the slave-owning range for each category (100, 6, 1, 1) and the highest end (1,000, 20, 5, 5) we emerge with a realistic floor and ceiling of the late Roman slave population: 2.33 million to 9.65 million slaves, 4.6 to 19.3 percent of the population.<sup>151</sup> Then, within these upper and lower limits, we could imagine multiple scenarios. Perhaps some would insist that Illustrious households owned slaves at higher levels, or that there were fewer Agricultural households than we have proposed. The suggestion of averages will involve the greatest margin of error. But under duress, and forced to abandon the disciplinary caution of the ancient historian, we could endorse a working reconstruction along these lines: a moderate estimate for Illustrious households (250 on average), a high number for Elites in core regions (20 on average), a low number for Elites in more peripheral regions (6 on average), and a modest average for middling households, Bourgeois and Agricultural alike (2).<sup>152</sup> With a population of 50,000,000 and an urbanization rate of 15 percent, this yields the totals in table 1.1.

Every figure in this matrix is contestable, but this reconstruction produces a slave population of 4,860,000 souls, just under 10 percent of the imperial population. The (hypothetical) distribution is revealing. The wealthiest 1.365 percent of Roman society owned 49 percent of slaves, a level of stratification that is remarkable but not at all incompatible with our knowledge of Roman social structure nor out of line with comparative evidence. The top 1.365 percent of Roman society thus owned the

<sup>151</sup> Note that the ceiling of 1,000 on the range of Illustrious slaveholdings is notional; some holdings were larger, but these were surely exceedingly few in number.

<sup>152</sup> cf. Scheidel 2005a, 66: *5 household slaves per decurion throughout the empire, 20 per equestrian, 80 per senator, all “best regarded as minima.”* 67: “The average senator could easily have owned hundreds of slaves, and the average knight, dozens.” My analysis divides the Elite population into core and peripheral groups based on economic and geographic criteria (see p. 49). The “core” was defined as regions under the influence of urban markets or commercial networks; here it is assumed (conservatively) that half of elites were in this group.

bottom 5 percent of Roman society. Equally noteworthy is the extensive side of Roman slavery, the long tail of slave-ownership. The historically broad middling strata of Roman society participated in the slave system, a fact which helps us appreciate why slave-ownership was such an important element of social definition. Moreover, this distribution tells us that half of all slaves were owned in small groups, half within larger proprietary formations. These basic distributional hypotheses will be essential as we consider the evidence, in future chapters, for the exploitation of slave labor, the life conditions of slavery, the opportunities for familial relationships, and so on.

An estimate of the slave population near 5 million souls and at 10 percent of the total population compares with the best attempts to quantify the slave system of the early Roman empire.<sup>153</sup> It is slightly lower than the estimates of the high imperial slave population, as we might expect, but here we sense an important difference in perspective. Recent work on the extent of early Roman slavery has taken the form of trying to ascertain the *upper limits* of the slave population. This is an interventionist approach aimed to correct long-standing but baseless estimates that overstated the number of slaves in the Roman empire. A strong case has been made that the slave population could not have exceeded 10–15 percent of the imperial population; any greater estimate would require implausible levels of transformation in a pre-modern context.<sup>154</sup> Our reconstruction of slavery in the fourth-century empire is consistent with these models of early imperial slavery. Subsequent chapters will make a case that our reconstruction is consistent with the supply patterns, occupational structure, social impact, and institutional framework of the late Roman slave system. If, throughout the rest of the book, we proceed to speak without too much hedging and hesitation of a late Roman slave population on the order of 5 million slaves, it is implicit that this estimate entails all the uncertainty we have encountered in our attempt to reconstruct the scale of Roman slavery; even if the signals of epistemological humility are muted, readers are referred back to this discussion, where hypotheticals and equivocations are plentiful.

#### LATE ROMAN SLAVERY IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Roman society in the fourth century was a slave society.<sup>155</sup> Slaves existed in large numbers, they played a crucial role in agricultural production, and

<sup>153</sup> It also resembles the conclusions of MacMullen 1987.

<sup>154</sup> Scheidel 2005a, 67–8, 1999, and 1997; Jongman 1988.

<sup>155</sup> Andreau and Descat 2006, 255: “au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle ap. J.-C., la société romaine mérite encore, à notre sens, d’être qualifiée d’esclavagiste.”

their presence deeply stamped social relationships and cultural values. We have already made allusion to the essential fact that not all slave societies are alike, so it is fitting to conclude this chapter by trying to place the late Roman slave system along the spectrum of history's slave societies and to consider its distinctive traits. It should be remarked straightaway that, if the slave system remained so important in the fourth century, then Roman slavery is noteworthy for its sheer longevity and breadth. It underlines our claim that Roman slavery should not be written within the frame of a national story, tied intimately with military conquest. Roman slavery was a distinctive phase of Mediterranean history, when a convergence of forces acted to intensify both the supply and demand for slaves over an extended arc of time. Roman slavery, as a category, is like Atlantic slavery, a big, complex backdrop against which a particularly tragic chapter in the long history of human enslavement played out.

Another feature of the Roman slave system is immediately striking: the overall weight of male slaves within the system. Caution is in order here, for chapter 2 will argue that the Roman slave population enjoyed a balanced sex ratio. The significance of male slaves in the Roman system has often been overstated, but in comparative terms, even our reconstruction proposes an unusually large complement of male labor within the system. Female slaves, especially in domestic contexts, are historically far more common than male slaves. In most slave systems, female slaves greatly outnumber male slaves, because slavery is limited in extent, principally associated with domestic or sexual labor, and largely confined to wealthy households.<sup>156</sup> Certainly this has been true for most of later Mediterranean history. Rome, however, combined extensive levels of household slavery with a strong component of slave-based agricultural production. There is a simple but elegant way to demonstrate this pattern: the price schedule of Roman slaves. The Price Edict of Diocletian reproduces what the imperial bureaucracy considered the fair maximum market value of slaves of different sexes and at different ages (table 1.2).<sup>157</sup>

The higher price of male slaves is a crucial fact, and the empirical data bear out the evidence of the Price Edict.<sup>158</sup> Slave prices reflect aggregate supply and demand for slaves on the market. Demand, in turn, is a function of the marginal value of slave labor and the consumption preferences of those with market power. The price schedule of Diocletian's Edict supplies indirect proof that late Roman slavery was still a system with

<sup>156</sup> See p. 162.

<sup>157</sup> *Edictum de pretiis rerum venalium*, 29 (Giacchero: 208). See now, on the text, Salway 2010. Prices are in *denarii*. Harper 2010; Scheidel 1996b. cf. Arnaud 2007, 334.

<sup>158</sup> Saller 2003, 185–6; Scheidel 1996b. See Harper 2010, for the empirical data.

Table 1.2 *Maximum prices for slaves in Diocletian's Price Edict*

Age (years)	Male	Female	% of male price
0 to 8	15,000	10,000	67
8 to 16	20,000	20,000	100
16 to 40	30,000	25,000	83
40 to 60	25,000	20,000	80
60+	15,000	10,000	67

a strong demand for male slaves, and thus with a strong component of agricultural production. This pattern is the historical aberration. In most slave systems, not only do female slaves outnumber their male counterparts, they command higher prices on the market. After antiquity, the price of female slaves would remain higher than the price of male slaves up until the opening of the Atlantic, when once again need for slave labor in agriculture outstripped the force of demand for female slaves.<sup>159</sup> The middle ages were bounded on either end by Roman and New World slavery, two exceptional phases when slavery was a vital force in agricultural production.<sup>160</sup> The evidence of slave prices suggests that the tectonic shift which would create the patterns of medieval Mediterranean slavery had not yet occurred in the fourth century.

The temporal longevity and price schedule point to another salient fact of the Roman slave system: the role of natural reproduction. As female

<sup>159</sup> Campbell, Miers, and Miller 2006, 163; Goody 1980, 37–40. Is it significant that already by AD 530, a detailed administrative price schedule (CJ 7.7.1) did not differentiate between the price of male and female slaves? McCormick 2001, 248, higher prices for female slaves in the medieval period. In the early tenth century Raffelstetten Toll, female slaves were charged a higher premium: *Inquisitio de theloneis Raffelstettensis*, no. 253.6, 251. Prominence of female slaves in middle ages: Goitein 1967–93, vol. 1, 147; Ragib 2002, vol. 2, 45–7, for medieval Egypt. Origo 1955, 336, females ten times as numerous as males and more expensive in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Tuscany. Epstein 1999; Stuard 1983, 161–3; Phillips 1985, 103–5; Balard 1968, 649–50, females 63 percent of slaves in thirteenth-century Genoa, and 659 for prices (females always higher). Gioffré 1971, 137, fifteenth-century Genoa. Romano 1996, 108 (servants, sixteenth-century Venice, nearly twice as many females). Budak 2000, 751. In the New World, the price of prime-age female slaves was regularly in the range of 80–95 percent of the price of a male slave, except when urban slavery was predominant over rural slavery: see Friginals, Klein, and Engerman 1983, esp. 1209–13. Verlinden 1955, 800–1, and 1977, 29: empirical evidence that male prices higher when used in agriculture and industry, female prices higher when domestic and urban slavery predominate. Lovejoy and Richardson 1995. Watson 1980b reports higher prices for boys in China, but explains that it was because they were purchased for the purpose of adoption.

<sup>160</sup> The Islamic middle ages were a notable period of slaving, and while most slaves were female domestics, there were important phases where plantation slavery developed, notably leading up to the Zanj rebellion. See in general Gilly-Elway 2000, 139.

slaves began to enter reproductive maturity, their price equaled that of male slaves; this pattern reflects their reproductive value. Chapter 2 argues that natural reproduction was the most important source of new slaves. In most slave systems, radical imbalances in the sex ratio, brutal mortality regimes, or high rates of manumission prevent slave populations from coming anywhere close to achieving levels of reproductive success that would perpetuate the system in the long run. The apparent longevity and scale of the Roman slave system, and its manifest dependence on births to slave-women, suggest that this was a society in which the slave population achieved a large measure of reproductive success. This in turn implies that the sex ratio was sufficiently balanced, that the mortality schedule was sufficiently normal, that the rate of manumission (at least of females) was sufficiently low, to allow the slave population to endure on a massive scale over centuries. The crucial variable militating against the reproductive success of modern slave populations was sugar; Roman slavery was organized around the production of the standard Mediterranean crops, which exposed the slave population to no extraordinary patterns of mortality or sex imbalances.<sup>161</sup> To be sure, alternative sources such as exposed children and imported barbarians were vital supplements in the Roman slave supply, but in comparative terms we must reckon with one of the few large slave populations in history that was shaped and stabilized by the processes of natural reproduction.

Even if exceptional by historical standards, the productive element of Roman slavery does not compare with the deployment of slave labor in the context of the New World. In the New World, slaves represented a high percentage of the overall population and in some regions and economic sectors constituted the primary force of productive labor. The uniqueness of New World slavery lay its dependence on cash crops, its integration with trans-Atlantic markets, and its relationship to a frontier environment, where super-abundant land and perennially insufficient labor combined to push slavery outwards along with the expansion of European settlement.<sup>162</sup> Voracious demand for sugar, tobacco, indigo, rice, and eventually cotton pushed against the supply curves for these goods, until eventually some 11 or 12 million slaves were taken from Africa to the western hemisphere. In the Roman world, it is true that wine became one of the first great cash crops, produced and marketed on a mass scale. Consumption habits changed massively under Roman rule. As an addictive, psychotropic product that provided a precious source of energy, in a world, moreover, without

<sup>161</sup> See chapter 2.      <sup>162</sup> Findlay 1989; Fogel 1989, 22; Solow 1985.

caffeine, tobacco, or other stimulants, wine already possessed many of the characteristics of the tropical groceries that drove New World slavery. But ancient wine production was typically pursued within polycultural strategies, and Roman slavery was adaptive not only to the production of wine, but also of wheat, oil, meat, and textiles.<sup>163</sup>

Historians should perhaps set aside comparisons between Roman slavery and the more intensive regions of modern slavery, the frontiers of cash-crop production that come to mind when we think of New World slavery – the coffee plantation in Brazil, the sugar plantation in the Caribbean, the cotton plantation in the Deep South. Instead we should search for parallels in the peripheral regions of slavery's great westward advance.<sup>164</sup> It is easy to forget that modern slavery flourished in a strikingly broad range of contexts – from the wheat and tobacco lands of the Virginia Piedmont and Chesapeake to the urban centers of the eighteenth-century North, such as New York.<sup>165</sup> Roman slavery finds closer parallels in regions of the New World where slaves were on the order of 10 percent of the population, and where mixed agriculture dominated the economy, with strong elements of wheat cultivation, animal husbandry, and small-scale craft production. In these regions, as in the Roman world, alternatives such as tenancy competed with slavery in a complex labor market. In these regions, as in the Roman world, slavery did not always radically transform the productive process. The uniqueness of Roman slavery is that, without the domineering influence of a frontier or a nascent world market, a vast and enduring pre-modern slave system became so intertwined in agricultural production. Even if slave labor in the Roman Mediterranean was always a limited input to the total labor supply, Roman slavery allowed a market-oriented aristocracy to control agricultural resources and to capitalize on market forces.

A slave population on the order of 10 percent, many of whom were employed in urban and domestic settings, is below what was once imagined in the context of the ancient slave systems. But reducing the scale of the Roman slave system to realistic levels does not undermine its significance. We now have a much clearer understanding of the limited potential of pre-industrial societies and underdeveloped economies. The Roman empire, in the long view, remains an exceptional place, one of the most notable efflorescences of the pre-modern world; it was perhaps the largest, longest

<sup>163</sup> See chapters 4 (on agriculture) and 5 (on management). <sup>164</sup> Roth 2007.

<sup>165</sup> For the former, see the essays of Koons and Hofstra 2000; Inscocoe 1995; Lepore 2005, eighteenth-century New York.



Table 1.3 *A profile of Roman slavery: structural features of a slave society*

Ownership	Labor	Supply	Incentives	Sexuality	Ideology	Institutions
Both upper and middling	Agriculture, textiles, and specialized	Natural reproduction, importation, and enslavement	Extremes of both pain and positive incentives	Late male marriage, pre-Christian honor–shame	Civic ideology of conquest	Roman law of property and status

phase of complexity before the second millennium. Slavery was an intimate part of that complexity. Rather than trying to salvage the uniqueness of Roman slavery by identifying a dominant slave mode of production, limited in space and time, we should see slavery as an integral component of the Roman imperial system. Slaves were often a thin presence within a given space, but this does not vitiate the claim to significance. The Roman empire was the interconnection of these zones of thin modernization, flung across a vast territory. Seen against the background of the giant, slow-moving world of subsistence and reproduction, the Roman slave system will appear small; seen, appropriately, within the vibrant, fast-moving world of capital floating atop the Mediterranean empire, Roman slavery takes on its true measure.<sup>166</sup> The extent of Bourgeois and Agricultural slave-ownership, and the significance of slave labor on the land of Illustrious and Elite households, made Roman society that truly rare organism, a slave society.

In subsequent chapters we will identify other distinctive features of Roman slavery, including its incentive structure (an exceptionally broad spectrum from physical torture to manumission with citizenship), its deep relation to sexual exploitation (where late male marriage and strong norms of female honor exposed slave-women to extraordinary abuse), and its institutional foundations (rooted in the Roman law of status and property). In many of these arenas, the practices and structures of Roman slavery resemble other historical slave societies, but Roman slavery was the convergence of these features in a unique system of slavery, the most extensive and enduring slave system before the discovery of the New World (table 1.3).

The present chapter has concentrated on a certain kind of evidence – anything touching on the extent, numbers, significance, role, or social location of slavery. This cull is only a small part of the harvest. The next eleven chapters add testimony, including thousands of references to the

<sup>166</sup> Compare Schiavone 2000, for the earlier period.

ancient authorities, which further substantiate the claim that Roman society in the long fourth century was a genuine slave society. The idea of a slave society will prove useful in the book's conclusion, too, when we briefly look into the decisive changes that occurred over the fifth to seventh centuries. There was always slavery in the Mediterranean. The history of slavery is continuous, in a qualified sense. As the Roman imperial system unraveled, slavery became less prominent in precisely the two sectors that made Roman slavery exceptional: sub-elite households and agricultural estates. In the centuries of the post-Roman kingdoms and the early Byzantine empire, a slave society was replaced by a series of societies with slaves. By the late sixth century, it would be hard to find an urban crowd, pressing together in the basilica, demanding from their priest an account of the peculiar institution of slavery. It is even harder to find a preacher casually and earnestly claiming that the "rich" household was an elaborate pyramid of slaves, while the "poor" household included families of slaves. This book is therefore an account of the Mediterranean slave system, in the last period during which the Roman empire was home to a slave society.