

# GOVERNMENT CENTRALIZATION IN LATE SECOND AND THIRD CENTURY A.D. ASIA MINOR: A WORKING HYPOTHESIS

**ABSTRACT:** *This paper offers the working hypothesis that increased central government intervention in civic and provincial affairs in the late second- and third-century A.D. Roman Empire can be partly explained by the effects of the demographic contraction following the Antonine Plague pandemic. The sharp reduction in the number of people who could work and pay rents and taxes posed a direct threat to government revenues and elite incomes. The result, growing central government attempts at direct control of local surpluses and increased exploitation of the non-elite population, is then tentatively documented for Roman Asia Minor.*

## I.

Probably sometime during the first half of the third century A.D., a small podium or loggia was added to the theater at Aphrodisias.<sup>1</sup> It was inserted, somewhat carelessly, into the central block of seating, and presumably served as the platform for a separate, distinctive “seat of honor,” set apart, that is, from the normal “seats of honor” reserved for the city’s notables and dignitaries. Dating from roughly the same period we have two inscriptions, found together partly buried in the north stretch of the city wall. The first, a statue base, reads:

The people of the most splendid city of the Aphrodisians (set up a statue of) Sulpicius Priscus, *perfectissimus vir*, proconsul, according to [the instructions] of our greatest and most revered lord Emperor Severus [Alexander].<sup>2</sup>

On the second inscription, a stele, we find a letter by Sulpicius Priscus, the governor honored in the previous text. He writes to the Aphrodisians (lines 11–17):

I will gladly come to you and make a stay in your most splendid city and sacrifice to your native goddess for the safety and eternal continuance of our lord Emperor [Alexander] and our lady Augusta [Mamaia].<sup>3</sup>

The situation seems clear. The Aphrodisians had invited the governor to come and stay with them and participate in the sacrificial

---

<sup>1</sup> See C. Roueché, “Inscriptions and the Later History of the Theater,” in: R. R. Smith and K. T. Erism, eds., *Aphrodisias Papers 2: The Theater, a Sculptor’s Workshop, and Coin Types*, JRA Supp. 2 (Ann Arbor 1991) 99–108, esp. 99–102.

<sup>2</sup> ὁ δῆμος τῆς λαμπροτάτης Αφροδεισιέων πόλεως Σουλπίκιον Πρεῖσκον τὸν διασημώτατον ἀνθύπατον κατὰ τὰς τοῦ μεγίστου καὶ θειοτάτου κυρίου ἡμῶν αὐτοκράτορος Σεου[ρή]ρου [Ἀλεξάνδρου] [ἐντολάς] For the text, translation and commentary see J. Reynolds, *Aphrodisias and Rome*, JRS monographs no. 1 (London 1982) 173–76, doc. 47.

<sup>3</sup> . . . ἡδέως ἐλεύσομαι[ι] [πρὸς] ὑμᾶς καὶ ἐπιδημήσω ἐν τῇ λαμ[προ]τάτῃ πόλει ὑμῶν καὶ τῇ πατρίῳ ὑμῶν [θεᾷ] θύσω ὑπὲρ τε τῆς σωτηρίας καὶ αἰω[ν]ίου διαμονῆς τοῦ τε κυρίου ἡμῶν αὐτοκράτορος [Ἀλεξάνδρου] καὶ τῆς κυρ[ι]ας ἡμῶν Σεβαστῆς [Μαμαίας] See Reynolds (above, n.2) 173–76, doc 48.

rituals, and the governor had accepted. But was this an incidental, casual visit? The new loggia inserted into the theater suggests not. Similar platforms for separate, distinctive seats of honor were added to the theaters of Tralles, Priene, Miletus, Termessos, Side and Nysa, all probably during the high and later imperial periods.<sup>4</sup> Starting from this fact, Charlotte Roueché has argued for a connection between the inscriptions just cited and the construction of the new loggia, and suggests it was designed for governors to sit on during what were now frequent visits to cities to participate in festive and religious rituals.<sup>5</sup> If true, this is highly significant. As is well known, for instance from inscribed seats found in theaters at Termessos, Roman Athens (theater of Dionysos), Lyon, Arles, and elsewhere, theaters, auditoria, and amphitheaters from Roman imperial times were not solely venues for games and festivals, but also served, by means of their seating arrangements, as spatial representations of the civic social hierarchy.<sup>6</sup> The insertion of a new seat of honor into the theater in the third century, set distinctly apart from the seats of honor reserved for the civic elite, therefore suggests symbolic and ideological recognition of the fact that a new top layer of authority had now become a more or less permanent part of the civic hierarchy. As Roueché argues, “such an arrangement reflects the increasing involvement of imperial governors in what had been typical areas of civic activity.”<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, as is well known, from the third century A.D. onwards, governors and other imperial officials increasingly appear in our sources as far more directly involved in civic life than they had ever been before.<sup>8</sup> At Aphrodisias, for example, honorific inscriptions that can be dated to the third century are almost without exception for imperial officials (governors or *legati*, some of them of local origin), emperors, and members of the imperial family, and not for the local elite benefactors who had dominated the honorific epigraphy of the city in the previous two centuries.<sup>9</sup> The city of Perge in Pamphylia is another case in point. Its unusually rich epigraphic record yields numerous honorific and building inscriptions for the first and second centuries A.D., allowing the editor of the Perge volumes in the *IK* series, Sencer Şahin, to make detailed reconstructions of trends and developments in public building, office-holding, and munificence at Perge. With the advent of the third century, however, the picture changes radically. The total number of surviving inscriptions is drastically

<sup>4</sup> Roueché (above, n.1) 99–102.

<sup>5</sup> Roueché (above, n.1) 100–101. She refers only to Reynolds (above, n.2) doc. 48, but the two texts are obviously connected.

<sup>6</sup> See O. M. van Nijf, *The Civic World of Professional Associations in the Roman East* (Amsterdam 1997) ch. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Roueché (above, n.1) 100–101.

<sup>8</sup> V. Nutton, “The Beneficial Ideology” in: P. D. A. Garnsey and C. R. Whitaker, eds., *Imperialism in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, London, and New York 1978) 219–21 for the classic analysis.

<sup>9</sup> C. Roueché, *Aphrodisias in Late Antiquity: The Late Roman and Byzantine Inscriptions* (rev. electronic 2nd ed.; 2004) <http://insaph.kcl.ac.uk/ala2004>.

reduced, and, if the epigraphic record is any guide, public benefactions by private individuals practically cease, public building comes to a near standstill, and both honorific inscriptions for emperors and members of the imperial family and votive inscriptions for the gods are by and large conspicuously absent. Significantly, however, almost all honorific inscriptions that do survive from third-century Perge are for imperial officials, and these are linked to their benefactions towards the city.<sup>10</sup>

Often, such greater involvement by the central government and its officials in provincial affairs is thought to have been a response to the conditions created by the so-called "crisis of the third century." In most accounts, this crisis is presented as a rather confusing jumble of growing threats along the Empire's borders, a rapid turnover of emperors, civil war, inflation, increasing brigandage, and general, but rather unspecified, economic decline.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, central government reaction to it is often seen as inconsistent, *ad hoc*, and ineffective.

In this paper I shall argue that if we take into account a factor that has been rather undervalued in most existing accounts of the late second and third-century A.D. Roman world, namely the Empire's long-term demographic development and its social and economic effects, we can offer a far clearer and more coherent explanation for the processes of centralization that appear to take place in the provinces than was possible before. My (brief) test case for this argument, as will be apparent from the opening paragraphs of this paper, is one of the Empire's richest and most urbanized provincial regions, Roman Asia Minor. First, however, we need to take a closer look at Roman population history.

## II.

The early Roman Empire of the first and second centuries A.D. was a highly decentralized structure. Large provincial areas the size of modern European nation-states were ruled by governors with a small retinue of aides and advisers, while local government and jurisdiction, as well as the vitally important task of tax-gathering, were largely the responsibility of the local urban elites. The later Roman Empire of the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., by contrast, had a strongly centralized system of government, despite the division,

<sup>10</sup> See *I. Perge* II, pp. 1–2.

<sup>11</sup> The bibliography is enormous, so my examples are necessarily highly selective. The classic analysis is M. Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, 2nd ed. (Oxford 1957) chs. 9–11. For an overview of the crisis from the point of view of the contemporary literary sources, see L. de Blois, "The Third Century Crisis and the Greek Élite in the Roman Empire," *Historia* 33 (1984) 358–77; G. Alföldi, "The crisis of the third century as seen by contemporaries," *GRBS* 15 (1974) 89–111; and Alföldi, *The Social History of Rome* (Baltimore and London, 1988) ch. 6. For recent assessments see P. Garnsey and C. Humfress, *The Evolution of the Late Antique World* (Cambridge 2001); D. S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay, A.D. 180–395* (London 2004); P. Eich, *Zur Metamorphose des politischen Systems in der römischen Kaiserzeit. Die Entstehung einer "personalen Bürokratie" im langen dritten Jahrhundert* (Berlin 2005).

from the late fourth century onwards, into an eastern and a western half, with a much enlarged imperial bureaucracy, more numerous and smaller provinces, a far more centrally run tax system, and a much reduced role for the local civic elites, at least in administrative terms.

How had this change come about? Many factors came into play, from internal civil wars to the need to defend Empire's borders against growing pressure from the Sassanid Persian Empire in the east, and barbarians in Asia Minor and the western provinces. A factor largely ignored in many accounts, however, is that of the Empire's long-term demographic development. As most scholars now agree, the Empire's population grew, slowly but consistently, from the Late Republic/early first century A.D. onwards, until population growth was checked by the onset of the long series of smallpox epidemics known as the Antonine Plague in the 160s A.D., after which the population never reached early imperial levels again, despite a modest revival during the fourth century.<sup>12</sup> Archaeological data series that can serve as chronological indices of the development of aggregate production and consumption over time broadly confirm this pattern of expansion and contraction of the population. We can point, for instance, to the chronological distribution of lead and copper pollution in the Greenland ice cap (evidence of Roman metal extraction and production) and of shipwrecks from the Mediterranean, to the rise and decline of public building, and to the chronology of Roman meat consumption, as reconstructed from animal bones found on dated sites.<sup>13</sup>

This pattern of population rise and decline has important implications for our interpretation of Roman economic, social, and, ultimately, political history.<sup>14</sup> For, theoretically, a rise in population

---

<sup>12</sup> See B. W. Frier, "Demography" in A. K. Bowman, P. Garnsey, and D. Rathbone, *The Cambridge Ancient History*, 2nd ed., vol. 11: *The High Empire, A.D. 70–192* (Cambridge 2000) 811–16; and Frier, "More is Worse: Some Observations on the Population of the Roman Empire" in W. Scheidel, ed., *Debating Roman Demography* (Leiden 2001) 139–59; R. P. Duncan-Jones, "The Impact of the Antonine Plague," *JRA* 9 (1996) 108–36; W. M. Jongman, "The Rise and Fall of the Roman Economy: Population, Rents and Entitlement" in: P. F. Bang, M. Ikeguchi, and H. G. Ziche, eds., *Ancient Economies and Modern Methodologies. Archaeology, Comparative History, Models and Institutions* (Bari 2007) 237–54.

<sup>13</sup> See F. de Callatay, "The Graeco-Roman Economy in the Super Long-run: Lead, Copper and Shipwrecks," *JRA* 18 (2005) 361–72 for lead and copper pollution in the Greenland ice-cap and Mediterranean shipwrecks. For the rise and decline of public building see Duncan-Jones (above, n.12) 127, figs. 10–11. For the chronology of Roman meat consumption see Jongman (above, n.12) 245 and Jongman, "The Early Roman Empire: Consumption" in W. Scheidel, I. Morris, and R. Saller, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge 2007) 613–14.

<sup>14</sup> At this point I should like to acknowledge that the following analysis was much inspired by earlier attempts to apply population/resources modeling to Roman history in Frier, "More is Worse" (above, n.12), W. M. Jongman, *The Economy and Society of Pompeii* (Amsterdam 1991) esp. 85–98, and particularly Jongman (above, n.12). See also W. Scheidel, "Demographic and Economic Development in the Ancient Mediterranean World," *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics* 160 (2004) 732–57. Classic applications of population/resources analysis to later European history are M. M. Postan, "Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime" in Postan, ed., *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe I: Agrarian Life of the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge

in a preindustrial economy would lead to higher rents, lower wages, and pressure on the land, as the amount of land is fixed while population grows, making labor abundant. Consequently, large landowners and employers become richer, while the situation of peasants, farmers (whether tenants or owner-occupiers), and wage laborers deteriorates. Social inequality increases. A fall in population figures, as after a major mortality catastrophe, would produce exactly the opposite result. Rents fall and wages rise, as land is abundant and labor scarce. Landlords become less well off, while the living standards of small farmers and wage laborers increase. Society becomes more equal. This, in a nutshell, was the development in medieval Europe in the centuries before and after the Black Death of the fourteenth century. Does the same scenario, however, also apply to Roman imperial history?

One problem with population/resources models such as the one just sketched is that they are based on the assumption that factor markets (i.e., of land, labor, and capital) were completely flexible and responded directly to fluctuations in supply and demand. In reality, of course, extra-economic factors, primarily the social, legal, political, and, ultimately, military power which elites were able to exert over direct producers had a distorting effect on the operation of markets.<sup>15</sup> This is an objection with particular relevance to Roman imperial society. The Roman world's large landowners at the same time constituted the Empire's urban, provincial, and imperial elites and were hence situated at the pinnacle of power in all respects: economic, social, political, cultural, and religious.<sup>16</sup>

Now, if we return to the subject of the Antonine Plague, it has been estimated that overall mortality from the plague may have been

---

1966) 548–659; E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Les Paysans du Languedoc*, 2 vols. (Paris 1966) and W. Abel, *Agrarkrisen und Agrarkonjunktur*, 3rd ed. (Hamburg and Berlin 1978). A good discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of this type of modeling can be found in J. Hatcher and M. Bailey, *Modelling the Middle Ages* (Oxford 2001).

<sup>15</sup> This argument against the population/resources (or neo-Malthusian/neo-Ricardian) model of pre-industrial economic change was most successfully advanced by R. Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe," *Past and Present* 70 (1976) 30–75. Brenner argued that, unlike in western Europe, in Europe east of the Elbe the population decline after the fourteenth century did not lead to the escape of the peasantry from feudal bonds, but rather to a re-feudalization of society, as powerful eastern European landlords discovered the gains to be made on the western European grain markets. If elites were powerful enough, they could abuse the peasants regardless of demographic trends. Hence it was the structure of class relations that ultimately determined whether population decline would lead to a reduction of inequality. Jongman (above, n.12) 246–50 argues convincingly that Brenner's model of developments in late medieval/early modern eastern Europe fits the situation of the third-century and later Roman Empire very well.

<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that market distortions caused by socio-economic and political inequalities do not necessarily imply a redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top. For instance, during the early Empire, when rents and wages should have moved, and probably by and large did move, in such a way as to increase inequality, the elite's extensive patronage networks (an index of their social and political power) might in fact have created a trickle-down effect that allowed sections of the lower classes to be slightly better off than they would have been if the distribution of income had been solely determined by market forces.

in a range from 7–10 percent to 25–33 percent at worst.<sup>17</sup> Areas most adversely affected, comparative evidence indicates, would have been those along the main trading and army routes,<sup>18</sup> something which, incidentally, suggests that Asia Minor may have been hit particularly hard, given its extensive road network and the frequent movements of troops to and from the Euphrates frontier.<sup>19</sup> Large concentrations of people were also highly vulnerable: according to Cassius Dio (73.14.3–4), a renewed outbreak in A.D. 189 caused 2,000 deaths a day in Rome. Given Roman imperial levels of urbanization and the frequency of long-distance movement of people, however, probably no major region of the Empire remained unaffected, and overall mortality was catastrophic.<sup>20</sup> Yet unlike Western Europe in the aftermath of the Black Death, the third-century A.D. Roman Empire does not present us with a picture of happy, better off peasants and weakened landlords.<sup>21</sup> Why were outcomes different? One crucial factor, I think, was the immense power and control Rome's political elite of city-based landlords was able to exert over the cities' agricultural territories and their rural populations, resulting from their domination in all social spheres.<sup>22</sup>

The demographic contraction caused by the Antonine pandemic must have had a direct negative impact on local elite incomes and imperial tax revenues, as there were simply far fewer people around than there had been before to work the land and pay rents and taxes.

---

<sup>17</sup> See R. J. and M. L. Littman, "Galen and the Antonine Plague," *AJP* 94 (1973) 252–55 (7–10 percent); W. H. McNeil, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York 1976, repr. 1994) 113 (25–33 percent). The most recent estimate, using sophisticated epidemiological modelling, suggests an overall mortality of 25 percent: Y. Zelener, *Smallpox and the Disintegration of the Roman Economy after 165 A.D.*, unpub. PhD thesis, Columbia University 2003. For a summary see <http://digitalcommons.libraries.columbia.edu/dissertations/AA13088458/>.

<sup>18</sup> Duncan-Jones (above, n.12) 134–35.

<sup>19</sup> S. Mitchell, *Anatolia. Land, Men and Gods in Asia Minor. vol. 1: The Celts and the Impact of Roman Rule* (Oxford 1993) 130–31, provides a convenient map. On the ravages caused by the Antonine Plague in Asia Minor see D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor to the End of the Third Century after Christ. vol. 1: text* (Princeton 1950) 663.

<sup>20</sup> Duncan-Jones (above, n.12) 135–36.

<sup>21</sup> Jongman (above, n.12).

<sup>22</sup> In this respect, Rome may have been much closer in structure to other large, pre-industrial empires like China, and rather unlike the politically much more fractured later medieval European world with its rural-based landlords and independent urban bourgeoisie. One anecdote neatly illustrates the extreme vulnerability of rural producers when faced with the demands of the city-based landlords. The Roman physician Galen tells how, during (frequently occurring) bad harvest years, "the city-dwellers, as it was their practice to collect and store enough grain for all the next year immediately after the harvest, left what remained to the country people, that is, pulses of various kinds, and they took a good deal of these too to the city. The country people finished the pulses during the winter, and had to fall back on unhealthy foods during the spring; they ate twigs and shoots of trees and bushes, and bulbs and roots of indigestible plants; they filled themselves with wild herbs, and cooked fresh grass." *De Alim. Facult.* 6.749–752. For comments see R. MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order* (Cambridge, Mass. 1967) 253; G. E. M. de Sainte Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London 1981) 13–14; P. Garnsey and R. Saller, *The Roman Empire. Economy, Society and Culture* (London 1987) 97, from which I have taken the above translation.



How did the central government and local elites respond? I suggest that the central government increasingly attempted to bring provincial surpluses under its own direct control, by reducing the capacity of local elites to distribute resources as they saw fit and by taking the gathering of taxes largely into its own hands. Local elites, in turn, probably attempted to reduce the financial burdens brought on by office-holding, liturgies, and benefactions, and to increase the level of surplus extraction from their direct rural hinterland, in order to retain their customary levels of income. Let us now see whether there is any evidence, from the Empire in general, but from Asia Minor in particular, to back up such a scenario.

### III.

Legal texts clearly reveal attempts by late second- and early third-century emperors to increase the imperial government's control over the exaction and expenditure of provincial surpluses, tasks which were previously left to the local urban elites. Thus Septimius Severus ruled that funds donated by elite individuals for the welfare of citizens' children (alimentary foundations) were from now on to be brought under the control of the provincial governor, where before these would mostly have been the responsibility of the local city councils.<sup>23</sup> The same emperor also decreed that cities could not levy a new *vectigal*, that is, a local indirect tax, generally a toll or a market due, without the provincial governor's explicit permission.<sup>24</sup> These sources illustrate once again the increasing control provincial governors gained over civic affairs during the early third century, a phenomenon already referred to above. Caracalla's doubling of the inheritance tax and the tax on manumission, both traditionally paid only by Roman citizens but universalized by means of the *Constitutio Antoniniana* of A.D. 212 which extended the franchise to most inhabitants of the Empire, provides clear indication of the central government's determination not only to extend its control over but also significantly to increase imperial revenues.<sup>25</sup> The increased exploitation of provincial communities by the central government which centralization made possible could also take the form of outsourcing some of the cost of central administration. Thus, as Michael Crawford has argued, the "enormous increase both in the number of Greek cities minting coins and in the volume of production" during the Severan and post-Severan ages, falling as it did "in a period when city autonomy was being progressively restricted and when city prosperity was to all appearances declining . . . should be regarded as the result of Imperial pressure and the coins minted in consequence as produced to meet fiscal burdens imposed by the central authority."<sup>26</sup> More direct attempts at expropriation of local surpluses were not shunned

---

<sup>23</sup> *Dig.* 35.2.89.

<sup>24</sup> *Cod. Iust.* 4.62.1.

<sup>25</sup> Cass. Dio 78.9.4-5.

<sup>26</sup> M. Crawford, "Finance, Coinage and Money from the Severans to Constantine," in H. Temporini and W. Haase, eds., *ANRW* II.2 (1975) 572.

either, as Herodian's comments on the emperor Maximinus Thrax's plundering of provincial cities' resources reveal:

He expropriated whatever public monies there were—funds which had been collected for the grain supply or for distribution to the people, or earmarked for shows or festivals. Dedications in temples, statues of gods, honors to heroes, and whatever embellishment there was of a public nature, or adornment of a city, or material out of which money could be made—he melted all of it. . . . In the cities and provinces, the hearts of the masses were inflamed.<sup>27</sup>

Turning to the situation in Asia Minor specifically, we should note the considerable increase in the number of imperial estates in the early third century A.D. resulting from the extensive confiscations of land by Septimius Severus (from individuals and cities that had supported his rival Pescennius Niger) and his direct successors.<sup>28</sup> Such a spectacular growth of imperial property naturally considerably increased the central government's direct control over the region's surpluses. The imperial center, however, also attempted to extend its hold over surplus extraction more generally, by centralizing taxation. From the early third century onwards, we find a growing presence in the region's cities and countryside of central government officials who seem to have been primarily concerned with the gathering of taxes and supplies for the state. As Stephen Mitchell argues, the preservation of security seems insufficient as a sole explanation for the sheer numbers in which imperial officials (*frumentarii*, *stationarii*, *collektiones*) seem to have been present in third-century Asia Minor.<sup>29</sup> Hence he argues that:

it is more plausible that their chief purpose was the exaction of taxes and other contributions to the state . . . . City magistrates and *publicani* . . . played a diminishing role in the collection and delivery of cash and goods. Financial pressures may have made many more reluctant to fulfil their old functions as tax gatherers, especially as they were generally expected to stand as guarantors for the sums they handed over to Rome.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, according to Mitchell, we are here confronted with a fundamental shift in imperial policy, which “heralds the age of Diocletian and Constantine, when the number of state officials had

---

<sup>27</sup> Herodian 7.3.4–6. Translation is by N. Lewis and M. Rheinhold, eds., *Roman Civilization II: The Empire*, 3rd ed. (New York 1990) 382–83

<sup>28</sup> See T. R. S. Broughton, “Roman Asia Minor,” T. Frank, ed., *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome*, vol. 4 (Baltimore 1938) 656–63 and 905–906 for the evidence and discussion.

<sup>29</sup> Mitchell (above, n.19) 232. For references to a selection of contemporary documents revealing the presence of these officials, see n.34 below.

<sup>30</sup> Mitchell (above, n.19) 232.



multiplied out of hand, and many earlier civic responsibilities had simply vanished from view."<sup>31</sup> Some caution is in order here, I think, as it seems to me unlikely that civic elites lost responsibility for taxation to the extent implied by Mitchell's argument. In fact, we know that in the later Roman world, *curiales* were still concerned with taxation. Whether the centralization of taxation was therefore only partial, or mostly consisted of an extra layer of taxation added onto the existing system does not, however, really affect our argument. What matters is the bare fact that, even if Mitchell is only half correct, the sources do seem to point towards a clear central government attempt to gain greater direct control over provincial surplus extraction by means of centralizing the gathering of (some) taxes, and that this is precisely the sort of response expected from an imperial government facing a declining tax income brought on by demographic contraction.

The titles of some of the officials in question, *frumentarii*, *stationarii*, *colletiones*, betray that originally their main task had been a different one. *Frumentarii* had originally been concerned with the supply of grain to army units and, apparently, secret police work, while *stationarii* were the police officers posted at stations along the Empire's road system.<sup>32</sup> Only the *colletiones* seem to have been tax officers originally.<sup>33</sup> Given the nature of their original duties, both *frumentarii* and *stationarii* would have been present all over the region in fairly large numbers to begin with, as they were in other provinces. They might even have been far more ubiquitous in Asia Minor, as its extensive network of roads covered the main army routes to the Empire's much fought over eastern borders. Hence they were a natural choice for an imperial government intent on (partly) centralizing its system of taxation. The fact, however, that the imperial government chose to work through such originally otherwise assigned officials rather than create a new category of official tax gatherers is indicative both of the relative haste with which the new policy was implemented and the pressing need to gain more control over taxation. Thus, the activities of the *frumentarii* etc. as tax gatherers should not solely be interpreted as part of a somewhat vaguely defined "militarization" of the eastern provinces, as Mitchell would have it. Rather, these activities can (also) be viewed as a fairly rational central government response to the problem of a shrinking tax income due to population decrease. This was a problem, of course, which was only aggravated by the fact that it occurred during a period when the government needed ever more money for troops to ward off the continuous and growing threats to the Empire's borders east and west. Not that the new tax system worked perfectly: we mostly know about the activities of the *frumentarii*, *stationarii*, and *colletiones* through (responses to)

<sup>31</sup> Mitchell (above, n.19) 233

<sup>32</sup> Mitchell (above, n.19) 232–34. On *frumentarii* see also Fiebiger, *RE* s. v. *frumentarii* and J. C. Mann, "The Organization of the *Frumentarii*," *ZPE* 74 (1988) 149–50.

<sup>33</sup> Mitchell (above, n.19) 232–34 and L. Robert, *Opera Minora Selecta* I (Amsterdam 1969) 368.

complaints by civilian and rural populations about illegal exactions and abuse at the hands of these very officials.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, what was the response of the local elites to the loss of manpower caused by the Antonine Plague? My hypothesis is that declining rent incomes brought about by demographic contraction made them less keen to hold office, perform liturgies, and make public benefactions. The evidence for civic munificence in Asia Minor indeed shows a steep decline in the number of recorded benefactions from the 220s A.D.<sup>35</sup> Particularly noteworthy in this context is the decline in numbers of the more expensive categories of benefactions. Contributions to public building, the most popular form of munificence in Asia Minor during the first and second centuries, and particularly donations of whole buildings, easily the most costly form of public giving, show a sharp decline from the beginning of the third century.<sup>36</sup> Foundations are another case in point. These were donations of money or land from the revenues of which a benefaction (usually a festival) was to be financed at recurring intervals. As such, they were some eight to twenty times as expensive as one-off gifts of the same type, and therefore by and large the preserve of the higher elite echelons.<sup>37</sup> In Asia Minor, they show a pronounced decline during the third century.<sup>38</sup> Local elites' growing reluctance to hold office and spend their private wealth for the benefit of the community can also be deduced from a

<sup>34</sup> Examples include F. F. Abbott and A. C. Johnson, *Municipal Administration in the Roman Empire* (Princeton 1926) nos. 142 (Ağabeyköy, territory of Philadelphia, Lydia, c. A.D. 200–250: villagers on an imperial estate complain about oppression by *colletiones* and other officials), 143 (Mendechora, also in the territory of Philadelphia, Lydia, c. A.D. 200–250: villagers protest against illegal exactions by *colletiones*, *frumentarii*, and “similar agents”), 144 (Ekiskucu, Lydia, c. A.D. 200–250: villagers have had unbearable burdens placed upon them by *stationarii*, *frumentarii*, and *colletiones*); TAM V.1.154 (Demirci, close to Saittai, Lydia, early third-century A.D.: illegal exactions by *stationarii*, *frumentarii*, and *colletiones*); TAM V.1.419 (Kavacik, Lydian Catacecaumene, A.D. 247/8: *frumentarii* and *colletiones* make demands of villagers as if the latter were wartime enemies); TAM V.1.611 (village near Satala, Lydia, early third century A.D.: illegal exactions by *frumentarii*, *colletiones*, possibly *stationarii*). See Mitchell (above, n.19) 229–34.

<sup>35</sup> This statement is based on the chronological analysis of a database of over 500 epigraphically recorded benefactions from all over Asia Minor dating from the first to fourth centuries A.D. See A. Zuiderhoek, *The Politics of Munificence in the Roman Empire. Citizens, Elites and Benefactors in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 2009) fig. 1.2. The time lag of some decades between the final cessation of the Antonine Plague and the decline in civic munificence is not surprising when we take into account built-up surpluses among local elites from the previous era of prosperity, projects already underway (buildings might take long to finish, foundations might take some time to amass sufficient revenues) and commitments already made, which might be hard to get out of, especially given increased imperial pressure on town councillors.

<sup>36</sup> Mitchell (above, n.19) 198, 211–17; Zuiderhoek (above, n.35) 56–57, fig. 4.1.

<sup>37</sup> Assuming 12 percent interest on money put out on loan (generally the way in which a cash-based foundation would be made to generate revenues; for the 12 percent interest rate see Pliny, *Ep.* 10.54), or 5 percent revenue per annum on landed property, for which see R. Duncan-Jones, *The Economy of the Roman Empire. Quantitative Studies*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge 1982) 33.

<sup>38</sup> See B. Laum, *Stiftungen in der griechischen und römischen Antike. Ein Beitrag zur antiken Kulturgeschichte I: Darstellung* (Berlin 1914) 8–9, fig. II.

series of contemporary legal texts from which it is clear that council membership, the holding of costly offices, and payment of liturgies became increasingly compulsory.<sup>39</sup>

Did the provincial elite react to the threat, and reality, of declining incomes by increasing the exploitation of the tenants on their estates? There is little direct, unequivocal evidence from Asia Minor itself, as this is a topic on which inscriptions, our chief source of information, remain mostly silent. A small honorific inscription from Xanthos in Lycia, which may date to the Antonine period, mentions a local benefactor who established a fund to relieve people unable to pay the regular land tax (*tributum soli*).<sup>40</sup> If this text dates to the late second century A.D. it may offer us a glimpse of deteriorating conditions among the local peasantry. A petition to the two emperors Philip from tenants on an imperial estate at Aragua in the upper Tembris valley dating from the 240s A.D. mentions "powerful and influential men in the city" among those who extorted and made illegal exactions from the tenants, abuses that evidently had been going on for some time.<sup>41</sup> If city-based landlords could get away, at least for a considerable period of time, with such blatant exploitation of small farmers even on a neighboring imperial estate, we have little cause to be optimistic about the condition of the tenants working their own estates. In general, we can say that the fairly complex managerial hierarchy already existing on the private estates of absentee landowners in Asia Minor, as revealed by some late second- and third-century A.D. inscriptions from Pisidia, would easily have allowed for an increase in the exploitation of the direct peasant-producers without unduly driving up the costs of oversight.<sup>42</sup>

Stephen Mitchell has argued for continuing general rural prosperity in (central Anatolian) Asia Minor during the third century,

<sup>39</sup> E.g. *Dig.* 50.1.18; 50.1.21 pr; 50.2.6.4; 50.2.7.3; 50.4.3.15–16 and 50.4.4. In general, see P. Garnsey, "Aspects of the Decline of the Urban Aristocracy in the Empire" in H. Temporini, ed., *ANRW* II.1 (Berlin and New York 1974) 229–52, republished with bibliographical addendum in P. Garnsey, *Cities, Peasants and Food in Classical Antiquity. Essays in Social and Economic History*, W. Scheidel, ed. (Cambridge 1998) 3–27.

<sup>40</sup> *TAM* II 291 with the comments of Benndorf *ad loc.*

<sup>41</sup> *IGR* IV 598 = *CIL* III 14191. The tenants mention a previous petition concerning the same abuses, leading to imperial instructions to the provincial governor to right the wrongs in question, but apparently to little effect. Interestingly, most known petitions to emperors by provincials complaining of local maltreatment by landlords, soldiers, or imperial personnel cluster roughly in the period 181–249 A.D.; see T. Hauken, *Petition and Response: An Epigraphic Study of Petitions to Roman Emperors, 181–249* (Bergen 1998). These were the decades during which the effects of demographic contraction and the socio-political disorder caused by the epidemics will have been most strongly felt at the local and provincial level. See also P. Hermann, *Hilferufe aus römischen Provinzen: ein Aspekt der Krise des römischen Reiches im 3. Jhd. n. Chr.* (Göttingen 1990).

<sup>42</sup> See in particular *IGR* IV 889, dated A.D. 207–208, referring to the situation on large estates in the territory of the Ormelian people to the west of the town of Olbasa, and *IGR* IV 894 from the estate of M. Calpurnius Longus at neighboring Alastus. Between landowner and peasant-producer we find, more or less in descending order, procurators (*epitropoi*) who on behalf of the landowner leased out part of the land to leaseholders (*misthotai*) who then extracted rent from the peasants, and

basing his argument on the uninterrupted series of votive and funerary inscriptions surviving from villages and country districts.<sup>43</sup> Such a continuation of rural epigraphic habits might indeed point to a relative absence of the sort of social and political disruption commonly associated with the third-century crisis, such as, for instance, widespread brigandage. If, however, we view developments on the land during the early third century as primarily conditioned by demographic contraction and increasing exploitation of rural producers, the argument does not hold much water. For setting up inscriptions would mostly be beyond the means of the poorer rural producers, who would have made up the larger part of the agricultural workforce. What the ongoing proliferation of inscriptions does reflect is the continued existence of at least a certain level of prosperity at intermediate and elite levels, which, on the assumption of an increase in the exploitation of direct rural producers to offset the effects of demographic contraction, is precisely what we might expect. Among other texts, Mitchell refers to the records of a religious association, the *Xenoi Tekmoreioi* (Tekmoreian Guest Friends), that were found in the territory of Pisidian Antioch. Some of the documents list subscriptions paid by members. In one series of texts, dating to A.D. 238, these payments range from 161 to 1,090 *denarii*.<sup>44</sup> Even allowing for some inflation, these sums are the equivalent of several times to more than thirty times annual subsistence.<sup>45</sup> The conclusion can only be that the people paying these subscriptions must have been owners of medium-sized and larger estates (or persons of equivalent wealth), not the small tenants and agricultural workers who made up the bulk of the rural workforce and who paid in hard labor for their landlords' epigraphic display.<sup>46</sup>

Given the peculiarities of our source material, evidence for an increased squeezing of the tenants in third-century Asia Minor

---

agents (*pragmateutai/oikonomoi*) who may have been involved in overseeing and collecting dues from those parts of the estates not leased out or worked by means of corvée labor during peak periods in the agricultural year. The situation by and large mirrors that known from estates in imperial North Africa, and, presumably, much of the rest of the Empire. For discussion see Broughton (above, n.28) 672–73, who quotes both texts in full; Mitchell (above, n.19) 163–64, with n.198 for references to further evidence.

<sup>43</sup> Mitchell (above, n.19) 239–40.

<sup>44</sup> Mitchell (above, n.19) 239 and Ruge, *RE s.v. (Xenoi) Tekmoreioi*.

<sup>45</sup> My estimate of the Roman annual subsistence ration is based on the assumption that subsistence needs equal 250 kg wheat equivalent per person/year. A wheat price of HS 3 per *modius* of 6.55 kg then puts the costs of one year's subsistence at HS 115, or about 30 *denarii*. For an annual subsistence need of 250 kg wheat equivalent see C. Clark and M. Haswell, *The Economics of Subsistence Agriculture* (London 1970), 57ff. and 175; K. Hopkins, "Taxes and Trade in the Roman Empire (200 B.C.–A.D. 400)," *JRS* 70 (1980) 118 with n.51. For a wheat price of HS 3 per *modius* see Rostovtzeff, *RE s.v. frumentum*, 149; Hopkins (above, this n.) 118–19; Duncan-Jones (above, n.37) 51; Jongman (above, n.14) 195 with n.2.

<sup>46</sup> Broughton (above, n.28) 674–75 suggests that "the persons involved [in the association of Tekmoreian Guest Friends] must have been in possession of fairly large holdings."

remains thin on the ground, even though more detailed research is likely to reveal more instances. The gradual economic, social, and legal oppression of the rural masses is, however, a phenomenon so integral to the economic and social development of the later Empire from the third century onwards that it is hard to see how Asia Minor could have been an exception.<sup>47</sup>

#### IV.

In this paper, I have proposed the thesis, using Asia Minor as an initial test case, that the tendencies towards greater government centralization and exploitation in the late second- and early third-century A.D. Roman Empire were a rational response by the central government and provincial elites to a decline in their tax and rent incomes brought about by demographic contraction. For the moment, this remains by and large a working hypothesis. It does not (and should not be taken to) deny the importance of other factors, such as continuous warfare on the borders, the requisitioning of supplies by passing armies, the depreciation of the silver coinage, the growing pressure on the urban councils, and a host of other developments that are generally considered to be part of the third-century crisis. Yet it may point the way, ultimately, to a story of Rome's decline and fall in which the interplay of population, epidemic disease, and an ever-growing accumulation of power in the hands of a tiny elite assumes just as much, if not more, importance than the internal political conflicts and barbarian invasions often alluded to in the more traditional accounts.<sup>48</sup>

*Ghent University*  
*Classical World* 103.1 (2009)

ARJAN ZUIDERHOEK  
andriesjohan.zuiderhoek@ugent.be

---

<sup>47</sup> The burden of proof, at least, is on those who want to claim so.

<sup>48</sup> I would like to thank Peter Garnsey, Wim Jongman, and the anonymous readers of *Classical World* for helpful comments.